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Levelling the Playing Field for Black Canadians

A Call to Action for Leaders



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Future Skills Centre

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.

The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada.

If you would like to learn more about this report and other skills research from FSC, visit us at fsc-ccf.ca or contact info@fsc-ccf.ca.

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Key findings

- Black Canadians said that workplaces undervalue their social and emotional skills (SES), affecting their skill evaluations and creating barriers to their advancement, such as limited promotion opportunities and feeling included.
- Black professionals perceived receiving fewer SES development opportunities compared with non-racialized counterparts.
- Over half of Black respondents perceived their SES being evaluated based on racial or cultural stereotypes rather than their actual capacities, with Black women facing an additional layer of bias based on their gender.
- Black participants stressed the importance of setting and evaluating diversity targets at all organization levels, with special emphasis on representation at leadership levels to ensure that Black Canadians are reaching their potential.

Recommendations

There are steps leaders can take to overcome these challenges:

- Co-create clear expectations and evaluation plans around SES with employees at all levels of the organization. This can ensure that diverse skill strengths and improvement areas are identified for all employees. Such a cooperative approach acknowledges the subjective nature of SES and recognizes individual differences.
- Provide intentional SES training to all employees to ensure equal access to learning opportunities and reinforce the idea that there is variety in how people understand and express these skills.
- Ensure diversity is represented at all levels of the organization, especially at the leadership table, to allow for a vast range of SES strengths to be modelled.
- Create spaces where employees feel safe to express themselves authentically at work by acting as allies, advocating for people to let their SES strengths shine, and taking candid feedback from Black employees.
- Celebrate diverse SES strengths—this is key to cultivating a workplace where everyone feels empowered and included.

Black Canadians perceive that employers undervalue their skills and knowledge. Not valuing people’s skills, and feeling that your skills are not recognized, can create barriers to inclusive workplaces, which ultimately holds Black employees back.

Through a national survey of over 9,000 working Canadians¹ and 66 in-depth interviews with diverse professionals across Canada, we’ve created one of the largest data sets in the country examining how Black Canadians see their racial identity impacting the recognition and evaluation of their social and emotional skills (SES) at work. (See [Appendix A](#) for a detailed methodology.)

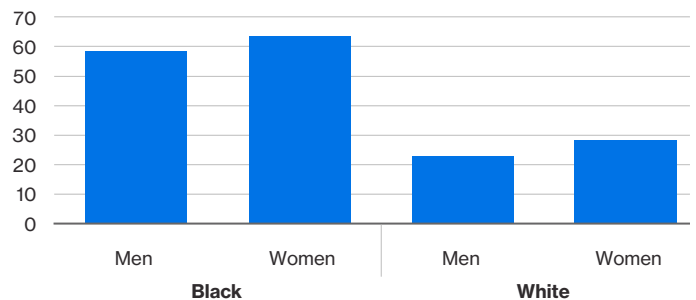
SES is a catch-all term that describes a wide range of skills, abilities, characteristics, and behaviours and can be defined as one’s ability to read and manage emotions, regulate behaviour, and build relationships. They are often referred to as “soft skills” or “human skills” and are critical to advancement in the workplace.² Examples of these skills include active listening, leadership, cultural competence, problem-solving, resiliency, collaboration, and communication.

Despite decades of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts aimed at levelling the playing field, Black Canadians feel that others’ perceptions of their racial identity negatively impact how their SES are recognized and evaluated at work. (See Chart 1.) Findings from our study suggest that systemic and unconscious biases act as significant barriers in the workplace, leaving many Black professionals feeling that their skills and potential are not truly valued at work—a loss for both the individuals and employers.

Chart 1

Black Canadians—especially Black women—are more likely to report discrimination at work, compared with white Canadians

(percentage of respondents who answered “yes” to: “Have you ever felt discriminated against in the workplace,” n = 1,071 Black respondents and 6,186 white respondents)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.



1 Smith and Gorea, *Bridging the Gap Between Identity and Social and Emotional Skills*.

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



Black voices need to be amplified

A talent and knowledge gap exists without representation from Black researchers, authors, and leaders, and attention to the voices of Black Canadians.

Black perspectives are largely missing from research and public conversations on many topics, including SES in Canada.³

Equitable inclusion and amplification of Black Canadians' voices are critical because:

- achieving Canada's 2018 commitment to foster Black Canadians' success will make progress on a variety of areas;
- large gaps in employment between Black Canadians and non-racialized Canadians⁴ remain;⁵
- recent data show that the COVID-19 pandemic had disproportionate economic impacts on Black communities;⁶
- racism against Black people in Canada is a persistent and prevalent challenge, impacting jobs across many sectors of society.^{7,8,9,10}

SES evaluation biases create career roadblocks for Black Canadians

Many Black participants reported bias in their employers' recognition and evaluation of their SES. They reported that this can act as a barrier to their career advancement and leaves them feeling that their SES are undervalued.

While role changes and promotions are the common markers of career progress, career advancement covers a wide range of activities that lead to greater responsibilities. From developing a new skill to taking on a leadership opportunity or moving to a new role within an organization, there are many steps to professional growth. But moving forward in an organization is an uneven playing field, and Black professionals say biased interpretations of their social and emotional skills are holding them back. (See Chart 2.)

3 Mullings, "The Racial Institutionalisation of Whiteness in Contemporary Canadian Public Policy."

4 Statistics Canada, "Labour Force Survey, February 2022."

5 Government of Canada, "Recognizing the International Decade for People of African Descent."

6 Environics Institute for Survey Research, *Widening Inequality*.

7 Foster and others, *Black Canadian National Survey Interim Report 2021*.

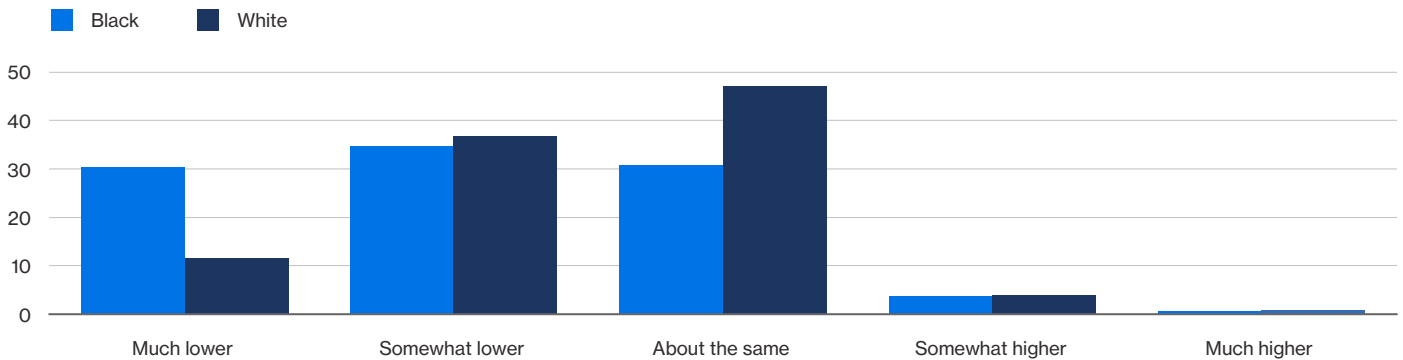
8 Kang and others, "Whitened Résumés."

9 Ngwenya, "Racialization of Gender, Work, and the Visible Minority Women at Workplace."

10 Environics Institute for Survey Research, *Experiences of Discrimination at Work*.

Chart 2

Black Canadians reported that their SES are rated lower than their peers at work, compared with white Canadians (percentage of respondents answering the question: “How would you say your social and emotional skills are rated at work compared to those of others in similar positions?” n = 1,071 Black respondents and 6,186 white respondents)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.



In their own words

Once you are living in North America or Europe, your racial identity is what people see. [It's] the first thing they are going to judge you [on] and it's going to impact how they evaluate you. It's just a fact of life.

Black woman

For myself, whenever I walk into a space, I have to be overly prepared. I think I have to do more, because there's already a judgment—a perceived bias on me as a Black woman

Black woman

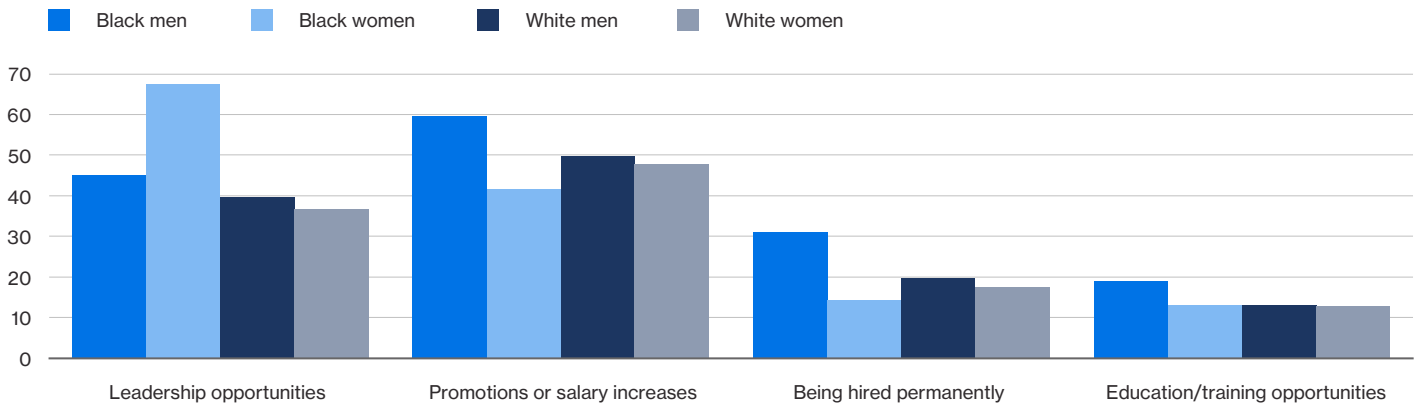
Different career paths can lead individuals to face different racial and gender barriers, which could lead to misinterpretations of important SES. For instance, 65 per cent of Black participants in our survey said that others judging or stereotyping the way they communicate is a barrier to effective communication at work. Misinterpretations of key SES, such as communication, have the potential to negatively affect one's career trajectory and could cause barriers to advancement, including limited promotion opportunities, exclusion from opportunities for growth, and lack of acceptance.

Black professionals tended to report that their SES are rated lower than white professionals in similar positions at work. (See Chart 3.) Among respondents who reported their SES being undervalued, 68 per cent of Black women felt that the unfair evaluations were a barrier to leadership opportunities, almost twice as common than the percentage of white women who felt the same way. Sixty per cent of Black men reported that the unfair evaluation of their SES was a barrier to promotions or salary increases, whereas only 42 per cent of white men reported the same.

Chart 3

Perceived biases in SES evaluations hinder Black Canadians' professional progress

(percentage of respondents answering "strongly disagree"/"disagree" to the statement "I perceive my social and emotional skills as being evaluated fairly," n = 120 Black respondents and 412 white respondents)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Black Canadians report fewer opportunities to build SES

The promise of skill development is an attractive part of joining an organization. While on the job, employees can improve the skills they need to succeed, including their SES. Skill development is also vital to Canada's competitiveness.¹¹ It is what drives our economic growth by enhancing employability and labour productivity.¹² The more that Canadians invest in skill development at the individual, organizational, and national levels, the better.¹³ But only 36 per cent of survey participants across all demographic groups reported that their SES are developed through formal workplace training initiatives.¹⁴

Most of the SES training that does occur happens through informal means. Workplace interactions, observations of others, and mentorships are the primary forms of SES development. Notably, fewer Black men and women reported that they received this kind of support than their white counterparts. (See Chart 4.)

Some Black professionals described not having as many opportunities to develop important SES, like leadership and communication, compared with non-racialized employees. Missed opportunities for skill development and feeling left out of important opportunities for SES growth can stifle career progression.¹⁵ Almost half of all Black participants reported that they didn't feel embraced and included by their colleagues at work. Not only did almost all white professionals report feeling embraced and included at work, but they also reported having ample opportunities to develop their SES.

11 Conference Board of Canada, The, "University Completion."

12 Government of Canada, "Building Essential Skills in the Workplace."

13 Government of Canada, "Backgrounder: Government of Canada Investments in Training and Skills Development."

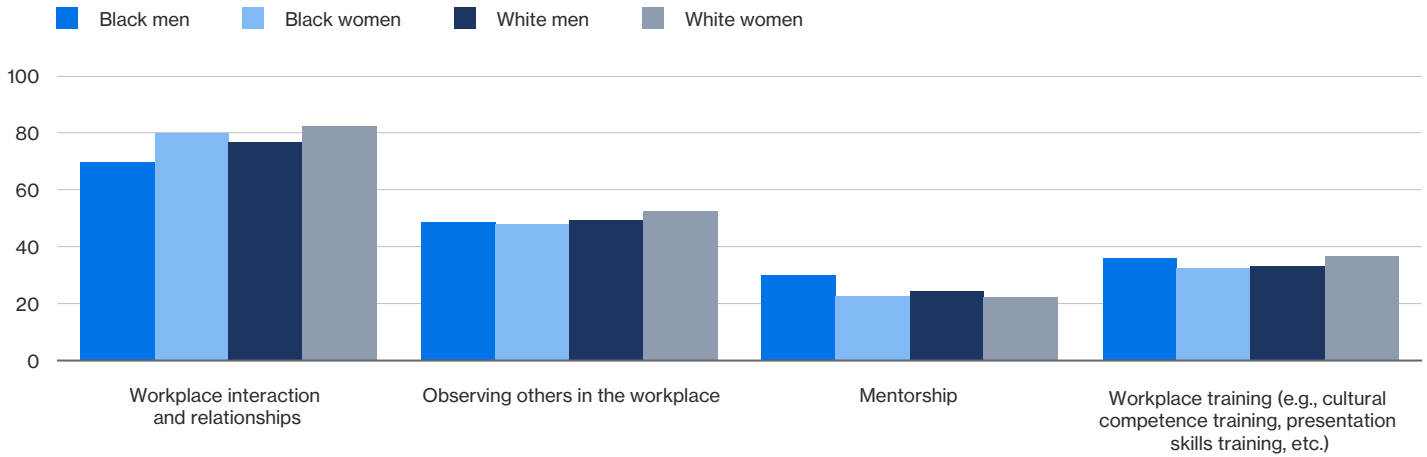
14 Smith and Gorea, *Bridging the Gap Between Identity and Social and Emotional Skills*.

15 O'Riley and others, "Is Negative Attention Better Than No Attention?"

Chart 4

Informal processes are the dominant ways SES are developed in the workplace

(percentage of respondents who indicated that they've developed their SES in one or more of the following ways, n = 1,071 Black respondents and 6,186 white respondents)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Unequal assessments

Formal skill recognition at work is vital to employee success and engagement.¹⁶ Acknowledging skills allows people to feel valued and important at work, but also grants workers the opportunity to identify their strengths, build on them, and develop new skills.¹⁷ But for skills to be recognized, they must be effectively evaluated.¹⁸



In their own words

They talk about the Black tax, this is where it is. Ten times more just to be seen as equal, and equal doesn't really happen. It's just so I can stay in the room and maintain my market share 10 times more. I think of the world that I live in, it's like 100 times more.

Black woman

¹⁶ Kis and Windisch, *Making Skills Transparent*.

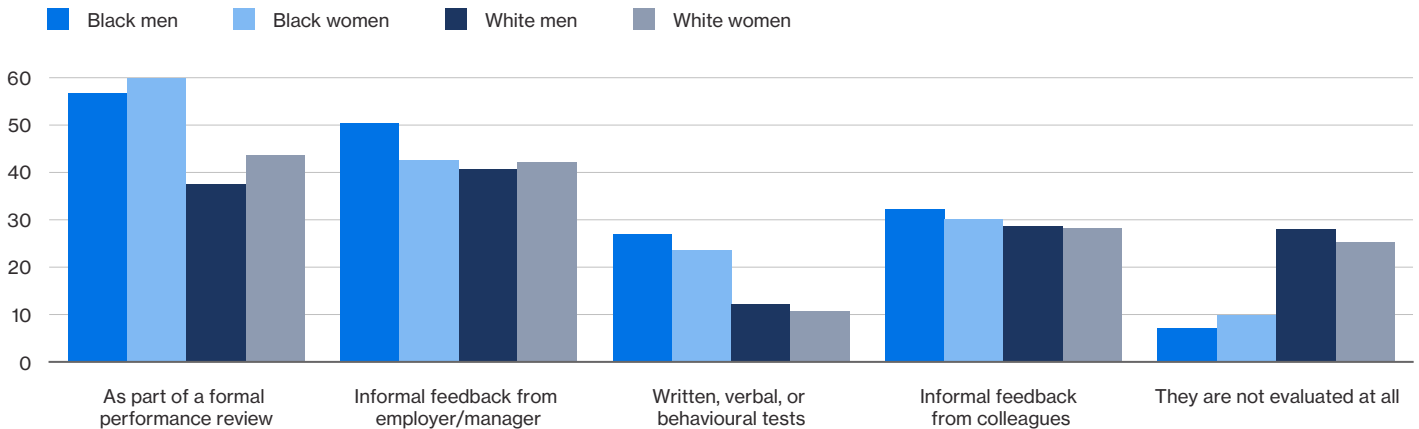
¹⁷ Markos and Sridevi, "Employee Engagement."

¹⁸ Brill, Gilfoil, and Doll, "Exploring Predictability of Instructor Ratings Using a Quantitative Tool for Evaluating Soft Skills Among MBA Students."

Chart 5

Black Canadians are more likely to report receiving formal/informal SES evaluations at work, compared with white Canadians

(percentage of respondents answering “yes” to measures by which SES are evaluated in the workplace, n = 1,071 Black respondents and 6,186 white respondents)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Participants across all racial and gender identities said that not only is there inadequate focus on the importance of SES in the workplace, but these skills are also difficult to accurately review in formal performance evaluations. We find that SES evaluations, when they do occur, are more commonly reported for Black professionals. (See Chart 5.)

Over half of all Black men and women reported perceiving their SES to be evaluated based on racial and/or cultural identity stereotypes (e.g., aggressive, loud, angry, etc.) rather than their actual capabilities. Some Black professionals believed their employers are less likely to recognize Black professionals’ SES strengths than they are to recognize those of non-racialized employees.¹⁹ Black participants commonly refer to this as the “Black tax,” which refers to the extra work that they must do to be seen as equal.

In addition to perceived racial identity stereotypes, over half of all Black women interviewed reported an added layer of perceived gender identity bias affecting their leaders’ and managers’ evaluations of their SES.

Progress is too slow

Despite decades of efforts to create equal opportunities for all employees, our research finds that structural barriers, legacies, and biases continue to create organizational behaviours and norms that disadvantage Black Canadians.

Black respondents in our study frequently described how organizational behaviours and norms continue to favour non-racialized people. They highlighted unequal access to social or professional networks to support career development and reported fewer opportunities to draw on existing connections for success in the workplace. This unequal playing field is a barrier that some Black participants reported as persistent throughout most industries and sectors. (See Chart 6.)

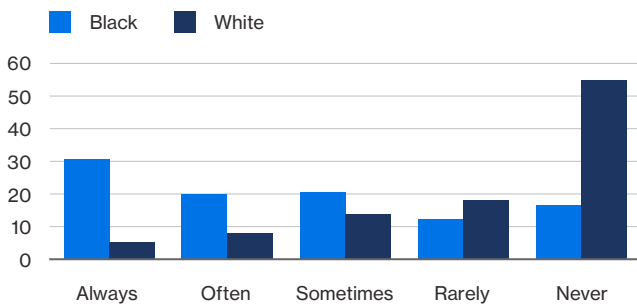
This is a stark comparison with some white men who described the inherent privilege that is attached to their racial identity. They said that, because of their privilege as white men, they do not face as many workplace barriers as racialized people. Similarly, some white women acknowledged that they experience significant advantage at work gained from being white, English-speaking women.

19 Participant interview.

Chart 6

Black Canadians are more likely to report feeling the need to alter their racial identity to meet SES expectations at work

(percentage of respondents answering: “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?” n = 1,071 Black respondents and 6,186 white respondents)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Many white participants said they may even get extra perks or opportunities because people tend to feel more comfortable with people who either look like them or who look and seem like others that have been successful before or elsewhere.

One Black man called this the “similar-to-me bias” – elaborating that, in his experience, employers are not looking for the SES strengths that Black people have to offer because they are typically interested in SES that are like their own. The similar-to-me bias results in some Black workers feeling like they are held to a higher standard to prove they have the SES to take on a new role, whereas those from the majority (often non-racialized workers) may be given the benefit of the doubt.



In their own words

You didn’t go to private school. You don’t have a dad or an auntie that has a membership at a country club. Your parents don’t play golf with so-and-so. Your path, in corporate Canada, will be very different. And you’re probably going to have to do extra efforts, versus some other folks who just can pick up the phone and call so-and-so who’s the dad of so-and-so to have access to opportunities. I think for a lot of us [Black Canadians], a lot of it is what we do, and the work, and our track record. And for a lot of others, non-Black, it’s ... their ability to build their network, the connections they have, the privilege to have access.

Black woman

I’ve got a significant advantage as a female, white, English speaker in the exchanges I’ve seen in my company, which is so unsettling.

White woman

I’m really privileged, and I like to think that I recognize that in my life right now. Especially not just ... in my area internationally, but on a global scale. The only way I could be more privileged would be to be a man.

White woman

There will be leaders who will value the skills that are similar to them, who will have the similar-to-me bias. And if [you] don’t, they won’t value the skills that you bring.

Black man

Motivating meaningful change

Making this meaningful change involves taking action across a range of organizational policies and practices.

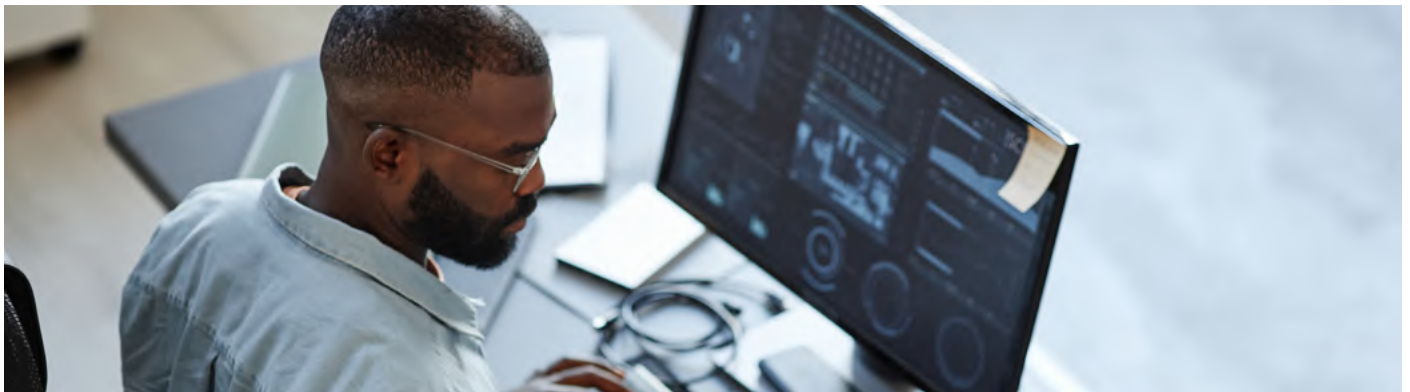
Individuals, particularly those in leadership roles, can create the changes to support the equitable recognition and evaluation of Black Canadian SES.

By understanding and acknowledging the systemic barriers that many Black people experience in daily life, leaders can create a culture that motivates meaningful change in the workplace and beyond.

Looking for leaders

Black interviewees noted the need for a broader discussion on how employees and leaders can co-create solutions to tackle the challenges Black Canadians face. They said leaders can foster concrete change—on both an individual and organizational level—by listening to their employees and responding with tangible solutions.

Participants expressed that by listening and acting on what they hear, leaders have the power to ensure that diverse SES are recognized and celebrated.



In their own words

There is inclusion, there's an effort for sure. Is it 100 per cent genuine and enjoyable on both ends? That, I would say, maybe not.

Black man

Many other factors need to be considered. [For example], the way that [Black people] are portrayed in the media, plus the systemic racism that we encounter on a daily basis just as part of our lived experiences. Those also impact our social and emotional [skills], and those things need to be accounted for.

Black man

People can have willingness to change, but the real change happens from the top down, from the leadership having the desire and the practical implementation to change things. The training, and not just diversity training, but the training on [SES], because some of the training focuses on making people aware of what the differences are.

Black man

We are not making changes because we are not including people who don't look like [white leaders] in the decision-making positions. Until [leaders] start bringing in people, sitting at the same table, making discussions, and creating programs and designing policies, it's going to be very difficult to see change.

Black woman

Treat everyone with empathy

According to interview participants across all demographic groups, many SES strengths stem from life experiences, including peoples’ professional, educational, and even childhood journeys. Because of this, there’s an opportunity for leaders to learn about employees’ lived experiences and SES strengths from the employees themselves and incorporate what they’ve learned into their understanding and evaluations.

To do this, many Black participants suggested that leaders can adopt an empathetic approach—moving beyond a narrow focus on departmental goals and concentrating on figuring out individuals’ SES strengths. In this, leaders can create an environment that optimizes employees’ SES growth.

Interviewees across all gender and racial identities said empathy, support, and patience are the most valued SES in a leader. This finding is also echoed in our survey, as 46 per cent of participants often associated empathy with strong leadership.

Many Black interview participants elaborated on the importance of empathy, saying that empathetic, supportive, and patient leaders are particularly valued by racialized workers because, at times, their SES strengths may go under-recognized. They described how empathetic and well-informed leaders may be more likely to recognize that everyone’s experience of navigating the workplace is not the same.

Many Black professionals explained that leaders who seek out strengths, rather than weaknesses, can develop a varied understanding of what constitutes “strong” SES and shape a culture that celebrates employees’ strengths and nurtures development.



In their own words

[A good leader is] a leader who cares about the development of the people that they lead. Some leaders are more concerned about where they fit the narrative of what they’re trying to do or the mould of their department, as opposed to figuring out what’s this person good at and how can I help them grow?

Black man

[Good leaders are] individuals who tend to be very empathetic, who are actively interested in hearing about what I’m doing outside of work, how I’m feeling.

White woman

Talk about diversity regularly

Black Canadians reported that when an organizations’ diversity, equity, and inclusion policies emerge in response to societal unrest and/or social justice movements, they risk being seen as token gestures.

In 2020, the cascading effect of the murders of Black people in the United States, such as Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, along with the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, catalyzed many Canadian employers to hold discussions on the impact of racism and discrimination on the lives of Black employees.

Crises should not be the only force motivating these discussions.

Instead, improvement should be intentional and sustained. Anti-Black racism policies that focus on the inclusion of diverse SES strengths must be constantly examined and reflected upon.



In their own words

When we saw Black Lives Matters really show up in the spotlight with media attention and just a push to awareness that followed that, a lot of organizations wanted to look at themselves and say, “Are we doing the right things? I hope we’re doing the right things.” Then it was this team of white people sitting in a room together going, “Are we doing the right things?” And it’s like, “You guys are going to have a hard time answering that in a team, you don’t have any of the voices of lived experience sitting in the room with you.” It’s going to be hard to answer.

Black woman

I don’t think it’s necessary for a study to come out every year, every two years, for people to be spurred into action. I think this is something that we should be looking at constantly, examining, reflecting on, and meeting about and trying to see if there is room for improvement constantly and not just when it seems trendy or when it seems necessary because of a certain event acting as a catalyst for change.

Black man

No matter how much we’ve moved the needle, when you do an analysis of what has changed, for the most part what changed is a lot of Canadian corporations ran out and hired a Black director of diversity and inclusion and announced it during Black History Month in February.

Black man

The battle to belong

Almost all Black workers reported challenges being their authentic self on the job. Respondents reported that this is because they perceive racial biases that often favour the norms and SES strengths exemplified by non-racialized people.²⁰

Some Black participants described their experience at work as a battle to belong. The battle here refers to the constant tension between finding ways to succeed on the job as a racialized worker while also being their true, authentic self.

White men’s and women’s experiences of authenticity at work contrasts with that of Black men and women. While white men also said that they can’t be their full, authentic selves at work, this is because they feel they must behave more professionally and be “a little more on your game” in the workplace than when spending time with family/friends.

Unlike Black participants, white men did not report that their racial identity influences whether they feel they can bring their authentic self to work.

There’s a strong business case for creating workplaces that encourage, support, and value all workers as their true, authentic selves.²¹ Workplaces that do are likely to be healthier and more productive, see lower turnover rates, and tend to be more profitable.²²

20 Hasford, “Dominant Cultural Narratives.”

21 Environics Institute for Survey Research, *The Black Experience Project in the GTA*.

22 Markos and Sridevi, “Employee Engagement.”



In their own words

In most places I show up, I have to break those stereotypes. I have to break those biases. I have to shape a new narrative, which doesn't always give me permission to show up how I want to show up.

Black man

If you're thinking predominantly Anglo-Saxon, including whether it's French, English, whomever, workplaces, not only do they not understand our respective African diaspora cultures in terms of our behavioural mannerisms, our social mannerisms, our respective culture mannerisms. Not only do they not understand, but they're not willing to accept it It becomes very contradictory when they're saying, "Well, we want you to be your authentic self, so long as it's within our parameters of what authenticity for Black people looks like."

Black man

Black Canadians report misinterpretations of their emotions

Black men and women disproportionately felt their emotions are used against them in the workplace.

Many perceived that they are thought of as overly emotional and that these characterizations overshadow Black professionals' ability to demonstrate their SES strengths and deliver their work. Over half of all Black participants reported that they are conscious of others misperceiving their communication style as loud and/or aggressive – which they attribute to stereotyped understandings of how Black Canadians express themselves.

Most Black women indicated that they must contend with an added layer of perceived gender identity bias influencing others' interpretations of their SES. Some Black women described being wary of how others may misconstrue their communication style as aggressive and falling within the angry Black woman stereotype. These misinterpretations are harmful and can influence peoples' perception of important SES like communication and teamwork.

Many Black participants reported practising conscious and unconscious tone policing and code switching, or monitoring and adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, and/or behaviour to make others more comfortable.²³ They do this by speaking more quietly, smiling more often, or asking fewer questions. In contrast, no white men we spoke with reported "tone policing" or "code switching" as barriers to being authentic at work.

This finding is also consistent with our survey results, as 51 per cent of Black respondents said they "always" or "often" feel the need to alter their identity to meet SES expectations at work. Only 13 per cent of white survey respondents said they changed their identity for the same reasons.

²³ McCluney and others, "To Be, or Not to Be ... Black."



In their own words

They are always looking at, “Was she angry?” or, “Was she this?” or, “Why did she say that?” “Why did she laugh at that?” We work in a congenial environment, and you don’t see those comments being directed at another candidate who is not of the same colour as myself.

Black woman

Authenticity is challenging for racialized people in nearly every environment outside of when they are exclusively with their own. Code switching, for instance, is something that I do and that people in my group do unconsciously.

Black man

You constantly have to police your tone to worry about trying not to make people, including your bosses, uncomfortable. Your entire life is about not just doing your job, but how to do your job while not making them uncomfortable. It’s an absolute reality.

Black man

It is tiresome [being Black in the workplace]. It is exhausting. And there are days that I just wish I could take the day off of that. Just get through the day without that being a constant weight or a presence. And I say that not because I don’t want to be Black, I say that because I’m tired of other people caring that I’m Black. Or it making a difference in a conversation. And it doesn’t make a difference in everyone, but sometimes all it takes is one microaggression to make the day that much heavier to get through.

Black woman

Being inauthentic takes a toll on Black Canadians

Code switching is an “impression management strategy where Black people adjust their self-presentation to receive desirable outcomes (e.g., perceived professionalism) through mirroring the norms, behaviors, and attributes of the dominant group (i.e., white people) in specific contexts.”²⁴

The Black Canadians we spoke to also told us that this behaviour modification is emotionally exhausting and painful for them.

Many Black women reported that the emotional work of presenting a version of themselves that is believed to be acceptable, successful, and promotable is immense and unavoidable. Given this, many Black women described the need to be resilient to cope with the seemingly constant racially biased and gendered perceptions of their skills and behaviours at work. These findings are mirrored by our survey results, in which 50 per cent of all Black participants reported resiliency as “very important” in their current role.

24 Ibid.

White participants did not report feeling pressured or required to present an alternate version of themselves at work due to their racial identity.

Despite the effort that goes into tone policing and code switching, some Black respondents felt they have no other option. As in by being their true self at work they may be setting themselves up for failure (e.g., poor performance reviews, denial of promotions), leaving them feeling they must develop, master, and perform a version of themselves that expresses SES in a way that will be best received and accepted by the dominant group (commonly white men).²⁵

The emotional tax, or the feeling of “anticipating and consciously preparing for potential bias and discrimination,” that racialized people experience at work is linked to Canada’s labour retention problem.²⁶ This is because workers have an increased drive to quit when they perceive that their workplace views them through a lens that perpetuates racial and/or gender stereotypes.²⁷



Recommendations

Findings from our research indicate that employers are not adequately adapting or responding to calls for inclusive and anti-racist work environments that support diverse Black Canadian SES strengths.

In response, we offer the following recommendations to support leaders and organizations in creating more inclusive workplaces to champion Black Canadians’ diverse SES expressions:

- co-create SES expectations and evaluations with Black Canadians
- train all employees to develop their SES
- ensure a diversity of SES strengths at all levels
- create safe spaces for expression and candid feedback from Black employees
- cultivate belonging for Black Canadians
- hold leaders accountable for diversity and equity initiatives

Co-create SES expectations and evaluations with Black Canadians

Leaders can work with Black employees at all levels of the organization to develop and implement clear SES expectations and evaluation plans. This can be done through facilitated working group sessions, one-on-one discussions, and anonymous feedback portals.

Co-created evaluation plans can be used for all employees at performance check-ins so that managers and employees work together to identify skills strengths and areas for improvement. The co-creation of SES requirements can reveal the subjective nature of SES and that SES strengths may look different for each person.

²⁵ Armstrong and Mitchell, “Shifting Identities.”

²⁶ Thorpe-Moscon, Pollack, and Olu-Lafe, *Empowering Workplaces Combat Emotional Tax for People of Colour in Canada*.

²⁷ Ibid.

Train all employees to develop their SES

Some Black participants suggested that organizations could be more intentional about SES training for employees by providing the support and tools needed to create diverse, inclusive, and equitable workplaces. Organizations can educate themselves on the value of diverse SES strengths and clearly articulate how these strengths are understood, evaluated, and celebrated in the company.

This can be done through professional development courses, clear trajectories for advancement, and transparency around the value of diverse SES.

Ensure a diversity of SES strengths at all levels

Black participants emphasized the value of diversity targets at all levels of the organization. Representation of racialized groups at the leadership level, for example, has the power to change perceptions of what a leader looks like. With diversity represented at all levels of the organization, especially at the leadership table, a vast range of SES strengths can be modelled.

Black women pushed further. They called on the need for Black women to be at the leadership table, suggesting that although organizations know how to implement diversity at the leadership level, representation isn't happening there the same way it is for Black men and white women.

Additionally, unconscious bias training for those who are recruiting and hiring could be implemented to ensure that hiring is meaningful, with representation of SES strengths across diverse races, genders, sexualities, and abilities, in all levels of the organization.

Create safe spaces for expression and candid feedback from Black employees

A supportive and empathetic leadership framework does not necessarily guarantee that employees will feel safe bringing their authentic selves to work and demonstrating their diverse SES strengths. Organizations can actively create spaces where employees feel safe to express themselves at work by acting as allies, advocating for their employees to let their SES strengths shine, and taking candid feedback from Black employees. For instance, they can do this by acknowledging that everyone demonstrates communication differently and not all will be comfortable sharing in a large group. To support the expression of different SES strengths, a leader may reach out to people individually to ensure that everyone gets the opportunity to share their opinions.

Leaders can advocate for individual successes by using their power and platform to elevate others' ideas.

If individuals see that their leaders are actively carving out the space for them to share and are being intentional about celebrating their individual SES strengths, they may feel more confident and safer to share their ideas, concerns, and successes—which can lead to SES growth.

Cultivate belonging for Black Canadians

Celebrating diverse SES strengths is key to cultivating a workplace where everyone feels empowered and included.²⁸ Feelings of belonging have important implications for employees' emotions, cognition, sense of self, and workplace performance.²⁹

Leaders can cultivate a sense of belonging so that everyone feels accepted and included at work by recognizing Black employees' SES strengths and celebrating employees' unique contributions, experiences, and abilities.

28 Participant interview.

29 Waller, "Fostering a Sense of Belonging in the Workplace."

Hold leaders accountable for diversity and equity initiatives

Increasingly, Canadian organizations are including roles (e.g., diversity officer, director of diversity and inclusion) that are directly focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Despite this, many Black interview participants still felt like not much has changed in terms of how racialized Canadians are treated at work—including unequal SES evaluations, barriers to advancement, and racial and/or gender biases in the workplace. This is because when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion, some Black participants felt that there is a lack of accountability for organizations and their leaders to create sustained change.

Black participants suggested employers implement accountability systems and policies to ensure leaders' mandates are carried out and that employees' SES strengths are recognized, valued, and promoted equally. If there's no accountability for and measurement of these actions, they can fall flat and have little or no true impact on Black employees' workplace experiences.

Accountability is central to being able to successfully create, implement, evaluate, and—ultimately—move the needle when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. It includes transparent and active communication about what is working, what isn't, and the next steps when it comes to tackling things like anti-Black racism in the workplace.

Appendix A

Methodology

Background

The goal of this project is to address the critical need for a diversity lens in Canadian SES research. We do this by analyzing how Black Canadians perceive their racial identity impacts how their SES are recognized and evaluated at work. Though this report builds on The Conference Board of Canada's extensive work on SES, it is part of a unique mixed-methods project comprising a national survey of over 9,000 respondents¹ and 66 in-depth interviews with diverse Canadian professionals.

A Research Advisory Board composed of diverse Canadian academics, business leaders, and diversity, equity, and inclusion experts provided advice and feedback throughout the research process and supported interview recruitment where appropriate. The research design and protocols were reviewed and approved by Veritas, a third-party ethics review organization.

Research questions

- How do Black Canadian professionals experience SES? How do these experiences differ from those of other Canadians?
- How does systemic bias and discrimination impact the assessment of Black Canadians' SES?
- What are employees' perceptions of how their employers are adapting or responding to calls for inclusive and anti-racist work environments?

Sample

This report focuses primarily on interview data from 66 Canadian professionals aged 18 and over who were asked if they felt their racial identity impacts how their SES are perceived and evaluated at work. Survey data are used to compare similarities and differences with interview data where applicable.²

Participants were interviewed for a duration of 45–60 minutes and were asked to self-identify by race and gender before the interview. All interview participants were employed (full time, part time, or self-employed) in a professional knowledge-based role.³ For the purpose of this study, we define professional knowledge-based workers as those who acquire, manipulate, and apply information to perform multidisciplinary work.⁴ We sought to interview a balanced sample of Black and white men and women to establish an analysis of racial and gender identities.

Interview participants were recruited through a general information landing page and through the Conference Board's mailing list. Our Research Advisory Board supported recruitment by sharing the project information with their networks. In some instances, we also used snowball sampling to obtain referrals from interviewees for additional participants.

Because this research aims to understand how Black professionals experience SES evaluation, development, and expression, interviewing both Black and non-Black Canadians allowed us to compare experiences.

The race and gender composition of our interview sample is outlined below.

Table 1
Race and gender composition of interviewees

	Men	Women	Non-binary	Total
Afro-Canadian/ Caribbean/Black	16	17	0	33
Asian	1	2	0	3
Indigenous	0	2	0	2
South Asian	0	2	0	2
White	11	14	1	26
Total	28	37	1	66

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

1 Smith and Gorea, *Bridging the Gap Between Identity and Social and Emotional Skills*.

2 Ibid.

3 Gabler, *Beyond Blue and White Collar*.

4 Mosco and McKercher, "Introduction."

Sample interview questions

- Are there opportunities to develop SES in your workplace?
Can you share some examples?
- What kinds of SES do you value in a leader?
- Are SES evaluated (either formally or informally) in your workplace?
- Do you feel that your SES are evaluated fairly in your current job? If not, why?
- Do you feel that your SES are valued by your leaders/managers at work?
- Have you ever felt that you were evaluated based on stereotypes of SES instead of your actual SES capacities?
- Do you feel that you can bring your authentic self to work? Why or why not?
- Do you think your racial identity impacts the evaluation of your SES in any way?
- In your opinion, is your employer adequately adapting or responding to calls for inclusive and anti-racist work environments?

Analyses

Fifty-five hours of interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized, yielding 1,502 pages (601,657 words) of text. This text was coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Coding themes were first developed based on the research questions and literature review, followed by exploratory examination within interviews. Iterative inter-rater reliability tests were run to ensure coding was consistent across researchers. Themes were examined based on how frequently they were noted, as well as the intensity of the observation. Gender and racial identity differences were reported when a significant percentage (i.e., 20 per cent) or more of one gender and/or racial identity noted a theme.

Limitations

Population groups for the interviews had a small sample. Given this, we cannot generalize to a larger group based on sample size.

Appendix B

Glossary

Anti-racism: the intentional and consistent process of eliminating racism at individual, institution, and systemic levels. Anti-racism involves challenging the values, systems, and behaviours that perpetuate racism at all levels of society.¹

Authenticity: the ability to display all aspects of one's identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.²

Code switching: "impression management strategy where Black people adjust their self-presentation to receive desirable outcomes (e.g., perceived professionalism) through mirroring the norms, behaviors, and attributes of the dominant group (i.e., white people) in specific contexts."³

Identity: the values, qualities, beliefs, and traits that make a person or group who they are and distinguish them from others.⁴

Emotional work: the emotional weight or load carried by workers to manage their feelings to conform to socially and organizationally defined rules and guidelines.⁵

Race: a socially constructed way of categorizing people based on shared physical and social characteristics, although none of these characteristics can "legitimately be used to classify groups of people."⁶

Privilege: "the experience of unearned freedoms, rights, benefits, advantages, access and/or opportunities afforded to some people because of their group membership or social context."⁷ Privilege can take many forms, including racial or gendered privilege, and can impact employees' ability to progress within an organization and even aid or hinder their skill development.⁸

Stereotype: "an oversimplified idea or belief about a specific group of people that can often be unfair and/or untrue."⁹

1 Canadian Race Relations Foundation, "Anti-Racism."

2 Kernis and Goldman, "A Multicomponent Conceptualization of Authenticity."

3 McCluney and others, "To Be, or Not to Be ... Black."

4 Burke, "Identity."

5 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

6 Government of Canada, *Building a Foundation for Change: Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy, 2019-2022*.

7 Canadian Race Relations Foundation, "Privilege."

8 Josten and Will, "Disentangling Privilege From Merit."

9 Canadian Race Relations Foundation, "Stereotype."

Appendix C

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