

Project Insights Report

EDI Backlash? What Canadian Workers Really Think



PARTNERS

Environics Institute
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Executive Summary

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives have become the focus of growing scrutiny across North America, with public debates often suggesting that these practices face widespread opposition. In Canada, this conversation has been shaped by rising costs of living, heightened immigration pressures, and political rhetoric. Yet there has been little evidence about how Canadian workers themselves view EDI in their workplaces.

This project analyzed data from the eighth wave of the national Survey on Employment and Skills, conducted in March and April 2025 with a total of 5,603 respondents across all provinces and territories. The dataset included questions on general attitudes toward EDI, perceptions of how much attention employers give to it, and whether workers felt it had affected their own opportunities at work. These measures allowed for a detailed portrait of how Canadians perceive and experience EDI across different groups, sectors, and workplace contexts.

The findings reveal that most workers see EDI as either positive or neutral, with only a small minority opposed. Over half of Canadian employees say EDI is a good thing, while about one-quarter hold no strong view and fewer than one in five say it is a bad thing. Nearly half report that their employer's EDI approach has benefited their own opportunities, compared to very few who report harm. Support is strongest among those who feel secure and satisfied in their work, showing how day-to-day economic conditions shape attitudes. These results matter for both policy and practice. They demonstrate that backlash narratives do not reflect the majority of Canadian workers and that EDI remains a broadly accepted and valued part of the workplace. They also reinforce the broader business and economic case for EDI: inclusive practices expand the talent pool, drive innovation, and strengthen competitiveness. With evidence that support exists among workers, Canadian organizations and policymakers are positioned to advance inclusion proactively and ensure the country remains ahead of global competitors.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** A majority of Canadian workers (54%) say EDI in the workplace is a good thing, compared to 27% who are neutral and only 16% who view it negatively, showing broad acceptance and limited opposition.
- 2** When asked about the impact of EDI on their own opportunities at work, nearly half of workers (47%) report that their employer's EDI approach has benefited their opportunities, while 35% say it has had no effect and only 12% say it has been negative.
- 3** Support for EDI is closely tied to economic security, with 68% of very satisfied employees and 59% of those who feel their income is adequate saying EDI is a good thing, compared to just 37% and 45% among those who are dissatisfied or financially strained.

► The Issue

EDI initiatives have faced growing scrutiny in North America. In the United States, high-profile court decisions and public criticism from political leaders and business figures created a climate in which EDI was increasingly framed as incompatible with merit-based practices. These debates spilled into Canada through media coverage and political discourse. They also spilled over through company policies of multinational organizations which are not headquartered in Canada but operate in Canada. Some Canadian organizations responded by scaling back or reframing their commitments, while others reaffirmed EDI as part of their long-term strategies.

The Canadian context is shaped by its own demographic and institutional realities. By 2041, racialized individuals are projected to make up between 42 and 47 percent of the working-age population. The Indigenous population has grown more quickly than the non-Indigenous population, and a notable share of younger Canadians identify as 2SLGBTQ+. At the same time, many employers report labour and retention challenges that point to the need for broader and more inclusive talent strategies. The legal framework reinforces these imperatives, with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Employment Equity Act, and human rights codes continuing to set obligations for organizations.

This environment has been complicated by economic and social pressures. Rising housing costs and affordability concerns, coupled with an unplanned increase in immigration, have intensified political debate and contributed to polarization. Hate crimes have reached historic highs and narratives equating EDI with unfair advantage have circulated widely. At the same time, Canadian businesses and institutions continue to highlight the advantages of EDI, from building innovation to strengthening relationships with new markets. These tensions create a pressing need for evidence that clarifies how Canadian workers themselves understand and experience EDI in the workplace.



What We Investigated

This project set out to examine how Canadian workers view EDI in their workplaces during a period of heightened public scrutiny. While debates on EDI had grown louder in the media and political arenas, there was little systematic evidence of how employees themselves perceived these initiatives. The project, therefore, focused on analyzing national survey data to explore variation in attitudes and experiences across demographic groups, sectors, and workplace contexts.

The research was guided by two questions:

1. How do Canadians perceive the role and impact of equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives in the workplace?
2. How do views on the importance of advancing EDI vary across different demographic groups in Canada?

To address these questions, the project used data from the Survey on Employment and Skills, conducted by the Environics Institute in partnership with the Diversity Institute and the Future Skills Centre. The survey was launched in 2020 to track how Canadians experience the changing nature of work, including technological disruption, economic insecurity, and shifting skills. By 2025, eight waves had been completed, encompassing more than 46,000 respondents. This project drew on the eighth wave, carried out between March 12 and April 15, 2025, with 5,603 respondents aged 18 and older from across all provinces and territories. The survey included oversamples of racialized Canadians, Indigenous peoples, and younger workers to ensure that the experiences of underrepresented groups were reflected.

This approach provided a nationally representative dataset at a critical moment. While the survey had not been designed specifically to investigate EDI, the eighth wave included targeted questions on general attitudes toward EDI, perceptions of employer attention, and reported impacts on workplace opportunities. These data allow the project to generate timely insights into how Canadian workers understand EDI and how these views differ across identities, occupations, and economic conditions.

What We're Learning

The research shows that most Canadian workers view EDI either positively or neutrally. Over half (54%) say it is a good thing, more than one-quarter (27%) say it is neither good nor bad, and only 16% view it negatively. When asked about personal impact, nearly half (47%) report that their employer's EDI approach has improved their opportunities, 35% say it has had no effect, and just 12% report a negative impact. Across all groups, outright opposition remains a small minority, never exceeding 15%, underscoring that EDI is broadly accepted in Canadian workplaces as either beneficial or neutral rather than harmful.

This pattern is consistent across sectors and demographic groups. While equity-deserving groups such as Black, South Asian, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQ+ respondents tend to report higher levels of support and benefit, and older white men are less supportive on average, these differences are modest compared to the overall trend. Across the workforce, opposition never rises beyond a small minority. Even among groups more cautious about EDI, neutrality rather than opposition is the most common stance.

Workplace conditions also shape responses. Employees who are satisfied with their jobs, feel secure in their income, and are optimistic about the labour market are more likely to report positive experiences with EDI. Those who are less satisfied or more insecure are somewhat more skeptical. However, across all conditions, the dominant pattern remains that most workers either see EDI as a benefit or as something that does not directly affect them.

Other factors that influence workers' support for EDI include immigration attitude and tech optimism. Among the respondents, 70% who favour immigration view EDI positively and 47% who believe there is too much immigration still support EDI. Optimism about technology also aligns with EDI, as individuals who are positive about new technologies are more likely to report EDI benefits in their own careers. As well, while economic insecurity and dissatisfaction with the job market drive opposition to EDI, tariff-related worries have not had an impact.

A key lesson is that backlash narratives do not reflect the views of most Canadian workers. EDI is not widely perceived as threatening or unfair. Instead, it is understood as a positive or neutral feature of the workplace, with few reporting harm and many reporting direct benefits.

★ Why It Matters

The findings from this project matter because they challenge the assumption that EDI efforts are widely rejected by Canadian workers. Instead, most employees either view EDI positively or are neutral toward it, and very few report negative impacts on their own opportunities. This perspective provides important evidence for organizations and policymakers at a time when public debate often overemphasizes backlash.

For practitioners, the results show that EDI initiatives are not only acceptable to the majority of workers but are also seen as beneficial by many. This reinforces the value of continuing efforts across sectors, including in workplaces where leadership may worry about resistance. Employers in the non-profit sector, for example, may draw confidence from higher levels of support, while those in public and private sectors can recognize that concerns about “too much attention” remain limited and do not represent the majority view. The evidence also highlights that neutrality is common, meaning that many employees are not strongly invested in EDI but also do not see it as harmful. This creates space for organizations to frame EDI as part of good practice rather than a point of contention.

Beyond worker perceptions, the findings align with the established business case for EDI. Inclusive practices expand access to talent, improve retention, and support innovation. They also help organizations connect with changing markets and strengthen long-term resilience. In this way, the survey reinforces that EDI is not just a social or legal expectation but also a driver of organizational performance and competitiveness.



State of Skills: Quality of Work

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At the policy level, the findings underline that scaling back or abandoning EDI initiatives could put organizations at odds with the workforce, particularly younger and equity-deserving groups who report the strongest benefits. Funders and sector leaders should recognize that EDI is not only legally and reputationally important but also broadly supported in practice. Policymakers can take from this that investing in inclusive workplaces is unlikely to generate worker resistance, and that economic and workplace conditions (e.g., job satisfaction and income adequacy) play a stronger role in shaping attitudes than external political debates.

In short, the project shows that EDI remains a solid foundation for building fair and resilient workplaces, and that opposition to these initiatives is far less widespread than public rhetoric suggests.

► What's Next

At this stage, there are no direct next steps for the project itself. However, the findings create opportunities for further work across the skills ecosystem. Future surveys could continue to track attitudes toward EDI to assess whether perceptions shift as economic and political conditions evolve. These insights can be applied in employer training and sector-wide practices by emphasizing that most workers view EDI as neutral or positive. For funders and policymakers, the results offer a strong evidence base to reinforce support for inclusive workplace strategies.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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