

Project Insights Report

Advancing Workplace Inclusion for Black Immigrants in Northwest Territories



PARTNERS

ProEdge Consulting



LOCATIONS

Northwest Territories



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Executive Summary

Immigrants are critical to Canada's labour market, as they account for over 80% of workforce growth and play a key role in addressing ongoing labour shortages. However, many racialized immigrants, particularly Black immigrants, face persistent barriers to employment and career advancement. The result is underemployment and underutilization of their skills.

This research, conducted by ProEdge Consulting, examines the unique experiences of Black immigrants in the Northwest Territories (NWT), a region where immigration is increasingly important yet under-researched. Using a mixed-methods approach, including a survey, Photovoice participatory research, and focus groups, the study identified both individual and systemic barriers.

The findings show that Black immigrants experience “conditional belonging” in workplaces, where they are valued to fill labour gaps but overlooked for advancement due to biases related to communication and cultural “fit.” Systemic challenges include the devaluation of international credentials, the requirement for Canadian experience, and exclusion from informal networks that support career mobility. These barriers often lead to survival employment, emotional strain, and limited career progression even with high qualifications. Despite these challenges, participants showed resilience and a strong commitment to contributing to their communities.

The findings highlight a broader structural misalignment between immigration policies and labour market practices. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated action, including competency-based hiring, equitable credential recognition, and stronger accountability for inclusive workplace practices.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Black immigrants in the Northwest Territories face systemic barriers that limit equitable access to employment and career advancement despite strong qualifications.
- 2 Workplace inclusion efforts often fail to translate into meaningful opportunities, with exclusion from networks and biased hiring practices restricting career mobility.
- 3 International credentials and experience are frequently undervalued, leading to underemployment and inefficient use of skilled talent of Black immigrants.

The Issue

Immigrants play a key role in supporting Canada's growing labour market and are essential to meet growing workforce demands. It is estimated that more than 80% of Canada's labour force growth is attributed to immigration. To support growth, there is heavy reliance on skilled immigrants to address economic demands and workforce shortages.

Despite this fact, many immigrants face barriers to accessing the labour market and advancing in their careers. The skills and experience of immigrants continue to be underutilized and undervalued in the Canadian market. Many immigrants continue to face underemployment, and are only able to secure jobs that are misaligned with their skills or qualifications.

These challenges are prevalent for racialized immigrants, and Black immigrants in particular face significant barriers. Despite their strong educational backgrounds and professional experience, Black immigrants encounter high levels of unemployment, underemployment and occupational mismatch. This is due to the devaluation of their credentials and international work experience, as well as exclusionary hiring practices and workplace discrimination.

The experience of immigrants is unique across different areas of the country. There are few studies of the experiences and challenges facing Black immigrants in the labour market in the Northwest Territories. Even though immigration is becoming more important in supporting the region's economic growth, the systemic barriers of Black immigrants in the North are not well-documented. Research is needed to understand what roadblocks exist and how to overcome them within this landscape.



What We Investigated

This research project from ProEdge Consulting examined the unique workforce challenges facing Black immigrants, and particularly youth, in the Northwest Territories.

The project sought to address the following four research questions:

1. What systemic barriers in credential recognition and workplace integration hinder equitable labour market outcomes for Black immigrant youth in the Northwest Territories?
2. How can employers be engaged to adopt equitable hiring practices, address anti-Black racism, and improve skill recognition processes?
3. What strategies effectively promote inclusive workplaces and better employment outcomes for Black youth, and how can these approaches be scaled across diverse contexts?
4. How can decent work and economic growth be promoted among Black immigrant youth to reduce employment inequities, advancing Sustainable Development Goals 8 and 10?

The study used mixed methods research to collect data from Black immigrants who lived and worked in the Northwest Territories. An online survey was completed by 57 participants. Using the Photovoice approach, 12 participants captured images and provided written narratives to illustrate their lived experiences. Finally, two virtual focus groups were conducted with 10 participants. Discussions focused on community engagement, employment pathways, and visions for inclusive workplace change. Survey data was analyzed, and data from the Photovoice narratives and focus group transcripts underwent thematic analysis.

What We're Learning

Black immigrants face systemic barriers related to their international education and experience

Participants indicated their degrees and professional certifications were questioned, undervalued or dismissed, especially among those with credentials from non-Western countries such as Caribbean and African nations. This experience had a significant impact including longer periods of unemployment or underemployment, and a need to invest in costly re-certification. In addition, participants reported that employers often failed to recognize extensive professional experience gained internationally, and would reject candidates lacking Canadian experience.

Black immigrants in the Northwest Territories face individual barriers shaped by conditional belonging and biased perceptions

Many participants described being welcomed in workplaces, but mainly to fill labour shortages rather than for their skills and long-term contributions. At the same time, their accents and speech patterns acted as gatekeepers, influencing perceptions of competence and professionalism in the workplace. Several participants reported being overlooked for career advancement opportunities despite being qualified, because their way of speaking was seen as “other”. These experiences underscore how cultural biases, beyond credentials alone, can limit equitable participation and career progression.

Many Black immigrants face underemployment, which takes an emotional toll

Participants reported needing to be employed in “survival jobs” such as warehouse labour or housekeeping, despite holding advanced degrees with professional experience. Participants described feelings of frustration, disappointment and shrinking self-worth. In addition to the impact on workers, there are broader implications on the workforce including reduced organizational performance and limited workplace diversity.

There are gaps between organizational inclusion commitments and actions to better support Black immigrant workers

Participants described a disconnect between organizational diversity commitments and everyday practices. They indicated that symbolic initiatives such as cultural events or training rarely translated into equitable advancement or protection from microaggressions in the workplace. This mismatch contributed to frustration and skepticism about the sincerity of organizational inclusion efforts. Many participants also indicated they were excluded from informal social and professional networks, which are critical for mentorship opportunities and career mobility. Without access to these relationships, individuals often felt stuck in entry-level roles despite strong qualifications.

Black immigrants continue to be resilient and committed to contributing to the labour market in the North

Despite the challenges they face, Black immigrants expressed a strong commitment to the North, and a desire to contribute to communities and the workplace. Participants were generally motivated to invest in local communities and to seek volunteer and mentorship opportunities. They continued to be resilient and adaptable to the workforce by pursuing additional training and completing Canadian certifications.

To address systemic barriers for Black immigrants, a multi-faceted approach is needed

Competency-based hiring practices, equity-informed policies and community-led collaboration are required to address barriers. Policies that disadvantage Black immigrants, such as requiring Canadian experience and inadequate credential evaluation require reform from territorial governments. Employers would benefit from fostering an inclusive workforce through anti-racism education, increased opportunities for mentorship and inclusive hiring practices.

★ Why It Matters

The findings from this project corroborate other research on the structural challenges in how Canada integrates skills immigrants into the labour market. Although this research is focused on the unique situation of Black immigrants in the North, the findings reinforce the well-documented challenges that immigrants are facing entering the labour force including lack of Canadian experience, limited professional networks, and non-recognition of foreign credentials. There is a persistent misalignment between immigration efforts to attract highly skilled immigrants and current labour market practices that systematically undervalue their international credentials and experience. This creates a system where immigrants are welcomed as workers into the labour market but not valued as professionals or supported as leaders. Without reform, long-term retention of skilled immigrants will decline and weaken productivity, innovation and economic growth.

This work further strengthens the calls for policymakers and employers to shift to more inclusive hiring practices. The research showcases that informal hiring practices can unintentionally create barriers that exclude diverse groups from the labour market. Practices such as requiring Canadian experience, relying on informal hiring networks, and emphasizing cultural fit, significantly disadvantage racialized immigrants. These are not isolated challenges but have become embedded norms that shape hiring practices and career advancement. As a result, policymakers and employers need to shift toward competency-based hiring, transparent promotion pathways, and accountability mechanisms that ensure diversity efforts translate into measurable outcomes.



State of Skills: Leveraging the Skills of Newcomers

Navigating career and training decisions is especially complex for newcomers given the challenges they face learning new systems and unfamiliar workplace cultures. Career development support for newcomers should come early and often.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

This research also has implications for how inclusion is understood and operationalized by workplaces. The disconnect between symbolic diversity initiatives and lived workplace experiences suggests that organizations must move beyond performative approaches and invest in structural changes. Employers need to better support diverse workers and implement actions such as equitable access to mentorship, anti-racism training, and leadership accountability. This has relevance for funders, regulators, and sector bodies that shape organizational behaviour through funding criteria, reporting requirements, and standards of practice.

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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