



Council on Inclusive Work Environments

Inclusive Data Collection and Analysis – Spring Series

Report Back on Focus Group: Self-ID Surveys – Best Practices for Design, Engagement, and Trust Building

Overview

An essential element in assessing how well an organization is doing in respect to diversity and inclusion is data. Data is collected with the aim of getting a better sense of inclusion within an organization, as well as for determining how effective workplace policies and practices are in terms of recruiting and retaining diverse talent.¹ Yet how does one collect this data? What are some best practices for survey design, communication, data analysis, in addition to effective follow-up policy review and development?

This focus group was one session of the CIWE Spring Series of 2022 that was intended to foster discussion on self ID surveys, the avenue by which many organizations attempt to get a sense of their workforce, the success of hiring and retention, as well as level of engagement, career progression, equitable treatment, and general inclusion of diverse employees. Recognizing the different stages that organizations must go through, this session gathered members from across four councils to explore the multiple steps involved in designing a survey, as well as the process of socializing and building trust within an organization to get the response rate needed to make informed policy and procedural change.

¹ Yiorgos Boudouris, “Gathering data for long-term success: diversity, inclusion and belonging,” MaRS Start-up Toolkit. <https://learn.marsdd.com/article/gathering-data-for-long-term-success-diversity-inclusion-belonging/>

What We Asked

We formed six discussion groups, consisting of organizational leaders in D&I and HR, as well as corporate ethics and workplace health and wellness who were members from a cross-section of our Conference Board councils, including:

- Council on Inclusive Work Environments
- Council on Workplace Health and Wellness
- Corporate Ethics Management Council
- Council of Human Resources Executives

Questions posed to each discussion group consisted of asking members about their experience conducting surveys, goals and purpose, design, and question development process, as well as best practices for socialization and trust-building.

What We Heard

Experience and Purpose of Self-ID Surveys

Council members we spoke with described how their organization had varying levels of experience in conducting self-ID surveys. For those who had established practices, the self-ID survey was utilized as a primary means of collecting data for regulatory reporting stemming from legislation such as the Employment Equity Act (1995) and more recently the Pay Equity Act (2018).² Additionally, some noted that self-ID surveys had often evolved or were combined with employment engagement surveys.

Focus group participants coming from organizations with less experience reported initiating self-ID surveys following 2020. Motivations for launching self-ID surveys at this time or otherwise could include rising social and corporate awareness of equity, diversity, and inclusion. This seemed especially the case following the protests surrounding the murder of George Floyd, as well as mounting data that the COVID-19 pandemic was disproportionately impacting equity-deserving groups, including racialized and low-income communities, women, Persons with Disabilities, LGBTQ2S+ and Indigenous youth.³ In a moment when many worked remotely (albeit not all), self-ID surveys were used as a means of getting a better sense of an organization's employees, including recruitment and retention, representation at different levels, as well as any gaps in employment and leadership diversity that could be used to set targets for the future.

Council members described how valuable this data was for informing the review and redesign of specific policies, programs, and procedures in order to improve employee satisfaction and retention. Having clear evidence to support the claim to an organization's prioritization of diversity and inclusion also proved valuable in attracting talent, particularly younger generations of workers for whom these issues seemed especially important. This again parallels evidence that Millennial and Gen Z workers express a strong inclination towards employers who have demonstrated their ongoing commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion.⁴

² Employment Equity Act (S.C. 1995, c.44), Government of Canada. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/e-5.401/>; Pay Equity Act (S.C. 2018, c.27, s.416. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/P-4.2/page-1.html>

³ Takara Small, "Canadian Companies emerge from COVID-19 pandemic with new diversity and inclusion plans," *The Globe and Mail* (1 August 2021), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-canadian-companies-emerge-from-covid-19-pandemic-with-new-diversity/>; Jakob Koziel, Maria Savidov, Andrea Frick, "A Brief Scan of COVID-19 Impacts on Equity-Deserving Groups and Corresponding Responses," Bissel Centre (November 2020); Amy Liu and Reniya Dinkins, "From commitments to action: How CEOs can advance racial equity in their regional economies," The Brookings Institution (11 March 2021). <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/from-commitments-to-action-how-ceos-can-advance-racial-equity-in-their-regional-economies/>

⁴ Jennifer Miller, "For younger job seekers, diversity and inclusion in the workplace aren't a preference. They're a requirement," *The Washington Post* (18 February 2021). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/02/18/millennial-genz-workplace-diversity-equity-inclusion/>

Survey Design Process

Many focus group participants explained that their organizations used language and wording that reflected legislative standards in order to fulfil their regulatory responsibility to ensure employment equity. By doing so, organizations could also compare their data more easily against broader government data collection on equity-deserving groups in Canada. That said, the slow pace of language shifts at the federal level could directly impact an organization's capacity to revise and review their own language in response to shifting perspectives.

Insights on question design also emerged, especially due to growing awareness of equity issues. Members explained the need to design questions that went beyond 'check-box' regulatory requirements, but were tailored to the needs, priorities, and perspectives of organizational employees. In order to achieve this, some spoke of how the survey template was viewed as an evergreen document within their organization to ensure that questions and format grew and evolved in parallel with their changing workforce.

Focus group participants discussed question and language changes around gender, such as presenting a broader range of options beyond 'male' and 'female', while also separating discussions of gender from sexual orientation. Language shifts also included terminology such as 'visible minorities' changing to 'racialized communities' and 'Aboriginal peoples' to 'Indigenous peoples' to be reflective of more recent rethinking pertaining to race and identity in Canada and beyond.⁵ Specificity around unique racialized communities also seemed important. Focus group participants spoke of how employees wanted to see themselves reflected in the categories presented that did not conflate race with ethnicity nor culture, while also acknowledging the complexity of different communities and identities.

Socializing and Trust Building:

Many council members expressed the need to socialize and build trust within their organization. This trust ensured positive engagement and high response rates in order to prompt organizational and policy change. This insight aligns with research indicating that trust is core to workplace inclusion, as well as an essential piece in the life-cycle of self-ID surveys and D&I data collection more broadly.⁶ In other words, to engage in self-ID surveys, employees must first trust that their organization will collect their data equitably with ethical standards in place to respect privacy and anonymity. Equally important, employees need to trust that organizational leadership will respond to the data provided by taking concrete action to improve the workplace for diverse professionals.

Focus group participants noted the following best practices to socialize and build this trust across the organization:

- Communication campaigns around self-ID surveys should be introduced well before the survey itself is launched, with multiple opportunities for different people at the organization to contribute over an extended period of time;

⁵⁵⁵ Tavia Grant and Denise Balkissoon, "'Visible minority': Is it time for Canada to scrap the term?" *The Globe and Mail* (6 February 2019). <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-visible-minority-term-statscan/>; "Term 'visible minorities' may be discriminatory, UN body warns Canada," *CBC News* (8 May 2007). <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/term-visible-minorities-may-be-discriminatory-un-body-warns-canada-1.690247>; Bob Joseph, "Indigenous or Aboriginal: Which is Correct?" *CBC News* (21 September 2016). <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-aboriginal-which-is-correct-1.3771433>; "Aboriginal Identity and Terminology," *Indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc* (10 February 2020) https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/aboriginal_identity_terminology/

⁶ "Guide to Developing a Strategic Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan," Society for Human Resource Management, 2017. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/guide-to-developing-a-strategic-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-plan.aspx>; Lauren Romansky, Mia Garrod, Katie Brown, Kartik Deo, "How to Measure Inclusion in the Workplace," *Harvard Business Review* (27 May 2021). <https://hbr.org/2021/05/how-to-measure-inclusion-in-the-workplace>.

- Secure and communicate senior leadership's commitment to improving diversity and inclusion within the organization, which includes reviewing policies and procedures based on the results of the self-ID surveys;
- Build and maintain relationships with employee resource groups throughout the design and socializing process to ensure questions are on point and key messaging reflects diverse employee needs and priorities;
- Communicate clearly the different steps taken to ensure data remains confidential and that privacy is respected. This includes gathering data on an independent platform by an external consulting firm, rather than collecting and storing the information within the organization's standard HR system;
- Communicate a post-survey strategy, namely how the data will be analyzed and used to inform the review of current policies, practices and procedures to improve workplace culture and systems for diverse employees across the organization;
- Post-survey, take note of the questions that receive a high response rate of "prefer not to disclose". During the analysis stage, consider the possible reasons why employees chose to select this option, including if they felt safe to do so or if the question itself was unwelcome. Derive evidence-based methods for revising the question posed if needed and/or take steps to address any gaps in trust within the organization.

Key Take-Aways

Council members participating in the focus group communicated the growing importance of self-ID surveys and D&I data collection within their organization, as well as some reasons why, namely:

- The need to meet legislative and regulatory equity requirements;
- Growing social and corporate awareness of equity, diversity and inclusion;
- New generations of talent looking to work for organizations that prioritize inclusion and diversity.

In light of such importance, focus group participants spoke of how organizations need to be very intentional in designing self-ID surveys, while also being strategic in socializing the survey and building trust within their organization. This will ensure that self-ID surveys result in meaningful and comprehensive data, which can in turn be used to inform the review of internal policies and procedures, the development or redesign of programming, and overall improvement to workplace cultures.

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