

Employment Equity Myths and Realities

"It is not that individuals in the designated groups are inherently unable to achieve equality on their own, it is that the obstacles in their way are so formidable and self-perpetuating that they cannot be overcome without intervention. It is both intolerable and insensitive if we simply wait and hope that the barriers will disappear with time. Equality in employment will not happen unless we make it happen."

- **Judge Rosalie Silberman Abella** Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, 1985.

1. **Myth 1:** Employment Equity means treating everyone the same.

Reality:

Sometimes Employment Equity means treating people the same despite their differences. Sometimes it means treating them as equals by accommodating their differences.

What happens when a co-worker has to go for a medical treatment during a shift?

Work shifts can be exchanged. How can various religious observances be accommodated? Flex-time could be one possible option. An employee could work slightly longer days if an extra day per month is needed for religious purposes.

There are many innovative ways to accommodate employees. Employers are also using long-term solutions, such as the provision of technical equipment to assist people with physical disabilities on the job. Braille computers and visual or hearing communication aids are only a few of the technological options appearing in more and more workplaces. Wheelchair access through ramps, automated doors and other structural changes is a standard feature in many new office buildings.

2. **Myth 2:** Employment Equity results in 'reverse discrimination'.

Reality:

Employment Equity means everyone has equal employment opportunities-not just a select group.

Employment Equity is about eliminating barriers faced by certain groups in society.

Employment Equity programs ensure that the skills of all Canadians are fully utilized by opening up job opportunities to everyone. Implementing Employment Equity does not mean people will lose their jobs because employers have made or will make room for designated

group members. It does not mean that all people hired or promoted will be members of designated groups either. There are and there will always be people hired and promoted who are not members of the designated groups.

3. **Myth 3:** Employment Equity is all about quotas.

Reality: Quotas are explicitly prohibited by the *Employment Equity Act*.

Employment Equity is not about quotas ... it is about goals-flexible, rational targets that employers can use, like all business goals, as planning and evaluation tools.

Under federal employment equity legislation, employers set their own goals and realistic timetables for achieving them, based on sound analysis and planning. Instead of quotas, employers set targets for measuring progress in hiring workers from the four designated groups.

4. **Myth 4:** Employment Equity means hiring unqualified people.

Reality: Employment Equity means providing all qualified and qualifiable individuals with equal employment opportunities-not just a select few.

The purpose of Employment Equity is to hire qualified candidates; it is not to hire unqualified workers just to reach some numerical goals.

5. **Myth 5:** Employment Equity threatens the seniority principle.

Reality: Employment Equity and seniority share a common goal: to make sure that employment opportunities are fair, without favouritism or discrimination.

Seniority rights acquired as a result of provisions in a collective agreement, or acquired as a result of established practices of an employer, are protected under the *Employment Equity Act* passed in 1995. The Act specifically states that seniority provisions are deemed not to be employment barriers.

However, if it appears that a seniority provision in a collective agreement has an adverse impact on designated group members, the Act states that the employer and bargaining agent are required to consult on measures that may be taken to minimize the adverse impact.

6. **Myth 6:** Employment Equity means lowering job standards.

Reality: Employment Equity examines job standards to ensure that job criteria are realistic and job related. A sound employment equity program guarantees that people are not denied jobs for reasons unrelated to their skills or abilities.

7. **Myth 7:** It is too difficult and expensive to accommodate persons with disabilities.

Reality: It generally costs less than \$500 to adapt a workstation to accommodate a person with a disability.

The qualified and qualifiable individuals include persons with disabilities.

There is often a lack of understanding about hiring, training, promoting or accommodating persons with disabilities and these people are often overlooked with regard to employment. Employers frequently express such concerns as: "I would like to integrate people with disabilities into this office, but the cost involved is too high," "I don't have sufficient resources to train people with disabilities; my existing staff are already too busy" or "I'm not opposed to the idea of hiring people with disabilities, but I don't know what kind of work they can and cannot do."

8. **Myth 8:** Employment Equity can only be implemented in a healthy economy. Reality: Employment Equity is a policy for both good and bad economic times.

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Employment Equity can be implemented in healthy economic times or during a downturn.

During tough economic times there certainly are fewer hirings and promotions, but employers still hire. Some turnover still occurs through retirement, death, maternity leave, voluntary and involuntary separations, and transfers. By using attrition organizations can open up employment opportunities for members of the designated groups. It is even more important for employment equity to be developed and implemented during times of job scarcity, to ensure that available jobs are fairly and equitably distributed.

Besides hiring, promoting and keeping designated group members in the workforce, employers have the challenge of accommodating the various needs of our population in a flexible manner. This, too, can be done during economic downturns while benefiting all employees in the organization.

9. **Myth 9:** Workplace equality should be left up to market forces; there is no need to intervene.

Reality: Employment Equity is required to complement market forces.

Market forces do not work in favour of equality for all groups in society.

The Canadian economy is market driven, and we know from experience that the market is not always an effective remedy for workplace inequality. On the contrary: Canadian demographics have changed dramatically in the last twenty years, yet the change is not reflected in the composition of the workforce.

A good, well-designed employment equity program can work effectively by creating an 'even playing field'. By putting in place temporary special measures, many employers are helping to bring about a workplace that reflects the demographics of their own sector. These measures are, in fact, catch-up mechanisms to assist those who have been excluded from employment opportunities.

Source: Government of Canada: Skills Development Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development.html>