



A TAILORED APPROACH

As employers increase their focus on diversity, equity and inclusion, they're using data to integrate DEI into their benefits plans

BY BLAKE WOLFE

DEI BY THE NUMBERS

- **91%** of benefits plan sponsors believe they promote and support a diverse and inclusive workplace, with **44%** strongly agreeing with this statement.
- **72%** have a documented strategy for DEI in the workplace.
- Employers with 500 or more employees are much more likely (**88%**) than employers with fewer than 50 employees (**45%**) to have a documented strategy.

Source: 2022 Benefits Canada Healthcare Survey

Like other large employers, Ontario Power Generation Inc. has a diverse workforce that embodies the broader Canadian population across multiple demographics.

The Crown corporation uses a variety of methods and measurements for gathering diversity, equity and inclusion data, including engagement surveys and focus groups to establish mental-health indicators by analyzing benefits usage, says Tanya Hickey, senior manager of health and safety strategies.

This analysis led to the introduction of an internet-based cognitive-behavioural therapy program designed specifically for OPG's First Nations staff. The program, which was launched in January as part of the organization's Truth and Reconciliation action plan, provides access to community-based cultural and emotional supports, including elders, traditional healers and knowledge carriers.

"Our [employee assistance program] didn't really hit the mark on offering the services that [First Nations employees] were looking

for, [as] it didn't incorporate traditional culture and so forth," she says.

In addition to surveys and focus groups, OPG also relies on feedback from its various employee resource groups to help tailor its benefits offering. Among the groups represented by ERGs at the organization are Black, Indigenous and people of colour, LGBTQ2S+ employees and workers with disabilities. The latter group provided feedback on differences in psychological support coverage between various employee and management groups. By sharing their stories through the ERG, says Hickey, these employees were successful in lobbying for more equitable coverage.

Data collection, analysis

When Michelle Grocholsky, founder and principal at consultancy Empowered EDI,

is working with employers to develop their DEI strategies, the firm analyzes data gathered through surveys, focus groups and interviews with an eye towards intersectional identity groups and cross-referencing demographics such as gender, age, sexual orientation and disability status.

In particular, this approach has supported improvements in employers' mental-health offerings by identifying the needs of racialized and LGBTQ2S+ employees, she says. "This is so we can better understand how a person having multiple different identities might impact their experiences, but also their outcomes inside of an organization."

Equally important is the analysis of qualitative data, specifically employees' comments. "We review all of those and we use that qualitative data to help us to better understand why those things might be occurring and also to help create a greater understanding or awareness in an organization of the nature of a problem," says Grocholsky.

"We find the numbers appeal to people's heads [and] we bring people on board cognitively when we share with them equity gaps or inclusion gaps across groups. But it's often hearing the stories and the real words of employees and their own words that helps to motivate change."

In light of the coronavirus pandemic, employers are increasingly applying DEI data to their workplace flexibility and caregiving benefits, she adds. "An area of opportunity as it relates to caregiving is for employers to take a look at their benefits packages and ask themselves whether there might be barriers around how those plans are constructed, who [plan members'] dependants are that are included in those plans, whether they're only restricted to a typical kind of nuclear family structure or whether, in fact, they might be able to extend them beyond that to extended family members."

When Normandin Beaudry is helping employers shape their benefits offerings through a DEI lens, the consultancy uses an assessment tool that allows employers to measure their plan design against industry best practices. The tool assesses plan design across 12 diversity categories — including how a benefits plan supports women, racialized employees and LGBTQ2S+ workers — with multiple criteria within each category.

"For example, when looking at how a plan supports [LGBTQ2S+ employees], it asks whether the plan sponsor is providing gender affirmation coverage to their employees," says Jacques-André Morin, a group benefits partner at the organization. "[The tool also asks] whether part-time employees are covered by the plan because we know that, statistically speaking, most part-time employees are women. Another example would be for health conditions. [An employer] may be covering blood pressure, but they're not covering shingles because shingles is covered by vaccines and most plan sponsors aren't covering vaccines."

Normandin Beaudry has used the assessment tool to improve its own benefits offering. In January, it added gender affirmation coverage — to an annual maximum of \$50,000 per plan member — as well as coverage for traditional Chinese and Indigenous medicines.

Privacy challenges

While personal employee data is a crucial aspect of DEI integration, its collection can create some privacy challenges for employers.

OPG takes a tripartite approach to its focus groups in order to alleviate any employee trust issues related to the collection of personal information. Similarly, its employee engagement surveys are anonymous and confidential to ensure privacy.

"We needed to do that in order to get a really good representation and [include]

FOCUS ON WELL-BEING, DEI DRIVING EMPLOYEE TRUST

Two-thirds (68%) of Canadian workers say their employer's focus on employee safety and well-being drives trust in the company's brand, according to a February 2023 survey by Proof Strategies.

The survey, which polled more than 1,500 employees, also found more than half of respondents say employers that are committed to diversity and inclusion (54%) and Indigenous reconciliation (48%) also inspire brand trust.

everyone's voice, because sometimes you hear the people who want to complain; they're going to be very, very vocal," says Hickey. "And someone who's like, 'Oh, it's alright,' they may not be as vocal, so we're trying to get everyone to have a say in what's going on."

When employers gather this data, it's important that it's never accessed on an individual basis, says Grocholsky. "A person should never be able to go into an employee's file and see the way they responded as an individual to these questions. Rather, what [employers] should be doing is taking a look at them in aggregate form in group sizes of five or more in order to pick out trends inside of the organization and the workforce in order to figure out where there might be gaps.

"It's really important that employers are transparent about how the data is being accessed, who has access to it [and] how it's been reported, but also providing folks with a clearer understanding of how the information is not used — that it's never used to make an employment decision about someone being promoted or terminated."

It's also important for plan sponsors to ensure their DEI data uses the voices, experiences and psychological well-being of systemically marginalized groups — such as BIPOC employees — to better understand what culturally relevant benefits plans can look like, says Karlyn Percil-Mercieca, chief executive officer at KDPM Consulting Group and curator of the Black Women and Psychological Safety in the Workplace Report.

"Too often, data is collected by and from the white racial frame and lens. This dominant worldview leads from racial ideologies and not the full flourishing of impacted individuals or groups, leading to more racial trauma. I encourage those with systemic power to look at who collects the data they're using and how that data is being used to ensure they aren't perpetuating the status quo."

DEI and mental health

Mental-health benefits, in particular, are subject to DEI factors.

By recognizing historic mistrust of health-care providers within some cultural demographics, as well as stigma around mental health, employers can tailor their offerings to all employees, says Dr. Khush Amaria, senior clinical director at CloudMD.

"[Employers] need to understand, if there's a particular population, for example, that has known lower rates of uptake and utilization and higher severity. . . . [They] need to be able to sell it to those employees, that this can be the right fit for them. Maybe it's because they see somebody who looks like them in the diversity of clinicians. We know that [mental-health treatment] dropout rates [differ among] different populations based on diversity."

Among the BIPOC community, systemic racism also plays a role in mental health and must be factored into a DEI-focused benefits plan, she adds. "You can't ignore the intersection [of racism] with mental health. If we use

the example of acute racism in and of itself, we don't have a lot of evidence that, by itself, is going to cause mental-health challenges. But when you have chronic stressors in terms of racism, we know there's a substantial change in one's mental health."

At OPG, employee feedback on access to mental-health care led to the introduction of unlimited mental-health counselling to support employees' individual needs. "The intent is not if you've got a chronic health condition, but if you're dealing with an acute situation such as grief [and] you need more than five sessions — maybe you need 10," says Hickey. "We'll accommodate that and make sure that you get [proper support]. If we recognize that you need some more specialized care or a treatment facility, we're going to refer you."

DEI and SMEs

While larger employers may have more resources than small- and medium-sized enterprises to tailor their benefits plans, smaller companies are also veering away from a one-sized-fits-all approach, says Cissy Pau, a principal at B.C.-based Clear HR Consulting Inc.

As a topic, DEI and benefits is growing among the consultancy's employer client base, which mainly consists of companies with five to 50 employees. "The key to employee retention and attraction is finding out what makes each employee tick, what their unique

interest and desires are and what's important to them," she says. "We now need to be looking at the individual characteristics that people bring to the table and how [employers] can support them."

And as the focus on diversity grows in wider society alongside evolving legislation and employee demand, smaller employers are increasingly incorporating DEI into the workplace, notes Pau. She cites the introduction of pay transparency legislation in British Columbia, which, as of Nov. 1, 2023, will require all B.C. employers to include wage or salary ranges on all publicly advertised jobs.

Employers will also be required to publicly post reports on their gender pay gap, starting with B.C.'s public service agency and Crown corporations. The requirement will then extend to employers with more than 1,000 employees in 2024, followed by employers with more than 300 employees in 2025 and employers with more than 50 employees in 2026.

"As these initiatives come forward, it might lead to more employment equity, data gathering requirements and data reporting requirements. I think employers will have to come along and start looking at some of these things."

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- With increasingly diverse workforces, employers are shifting their benefits plans away from a one-sized-fits-all approach to a more individualized strategy.
- Employers are gathering DEI data using a number of methods, from surveys and focus groups to feedback from ERGs.
- When collecting this data, employers must take all the necessary steps to maintain employee privacy and confidentiality.