



Canadian HR Guide: Combatting Racism in the Workplace

Prepared for UKG by Parris Consulting

Introduction

Many people assert that racism doesn't exist in Canada. But every day, we see examples of people being discriminated against and marginalized because of their skin colour or other identity markers. Even people who understand that systemic racism exists in Canadian society may look away—intentionally or unintentionally—because of its uncomfortable implications.

As one of the world's most racially and ethnically diverse nations, Canada has a role to play in confronting the reality of racism. It's insufficient to simply not be racist; we must actively combat racism. We must embark on an anti-discrimination journey. We must be anti-racist.

How do we begin?

It starts with asking hard questions about the systems that benefit some of us at the expense of others. It means examining our attitudes and assumptions. It means collaborating sincerely and courageously to understand how systems may disadvantage racialized people, and being prepared to dismantle those systems. And it means embracing diversity and inclusion—in our neighbourhoods, in our business communities, and in leading organizations with the power to reimagine how the workplace looks and feels.



“We must open the doors, and we must see to it they remain open so that others can pass through.”

Rosemary Brown | First Black woman in Canada to sit in a Provincial Legislature

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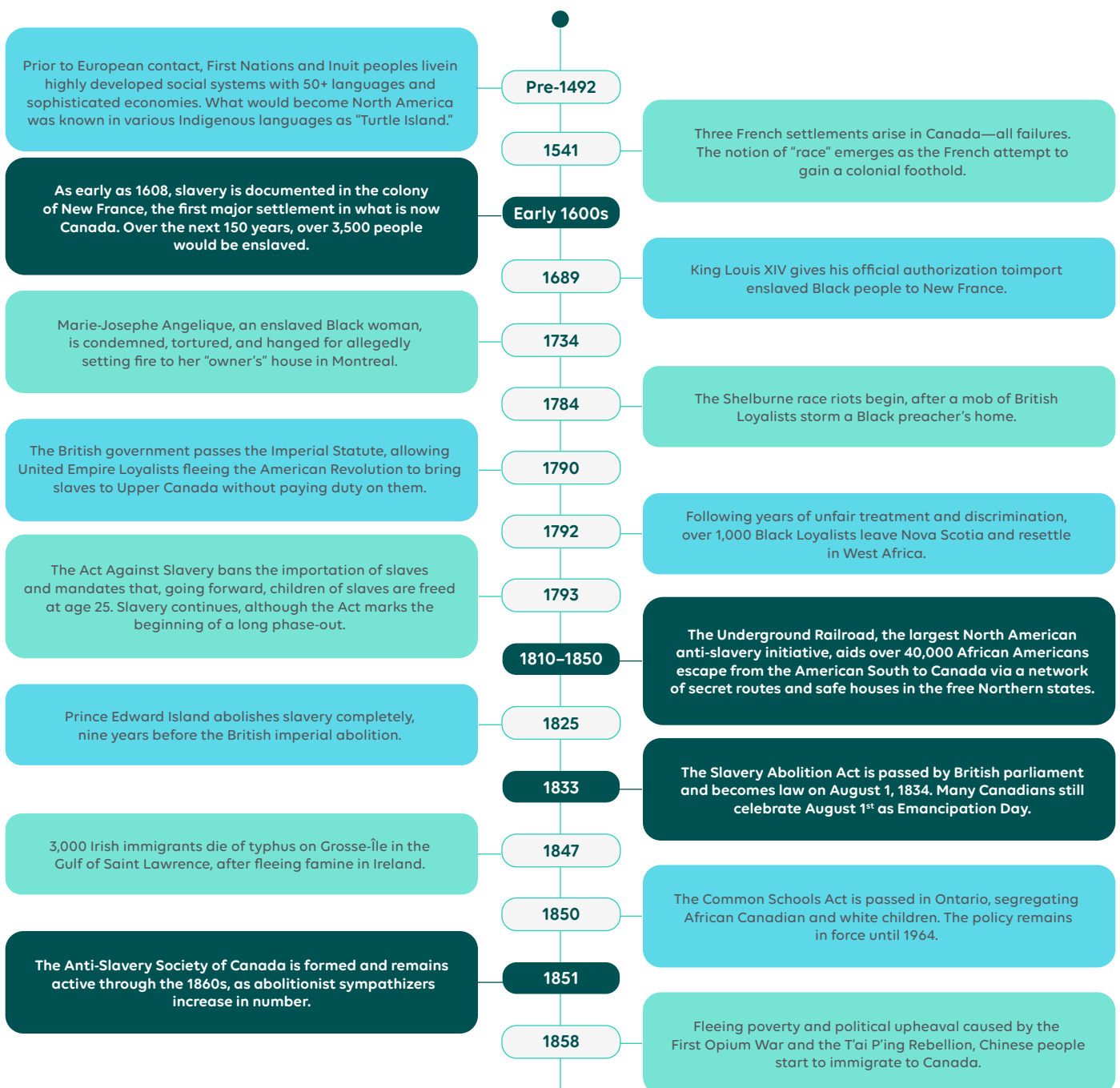
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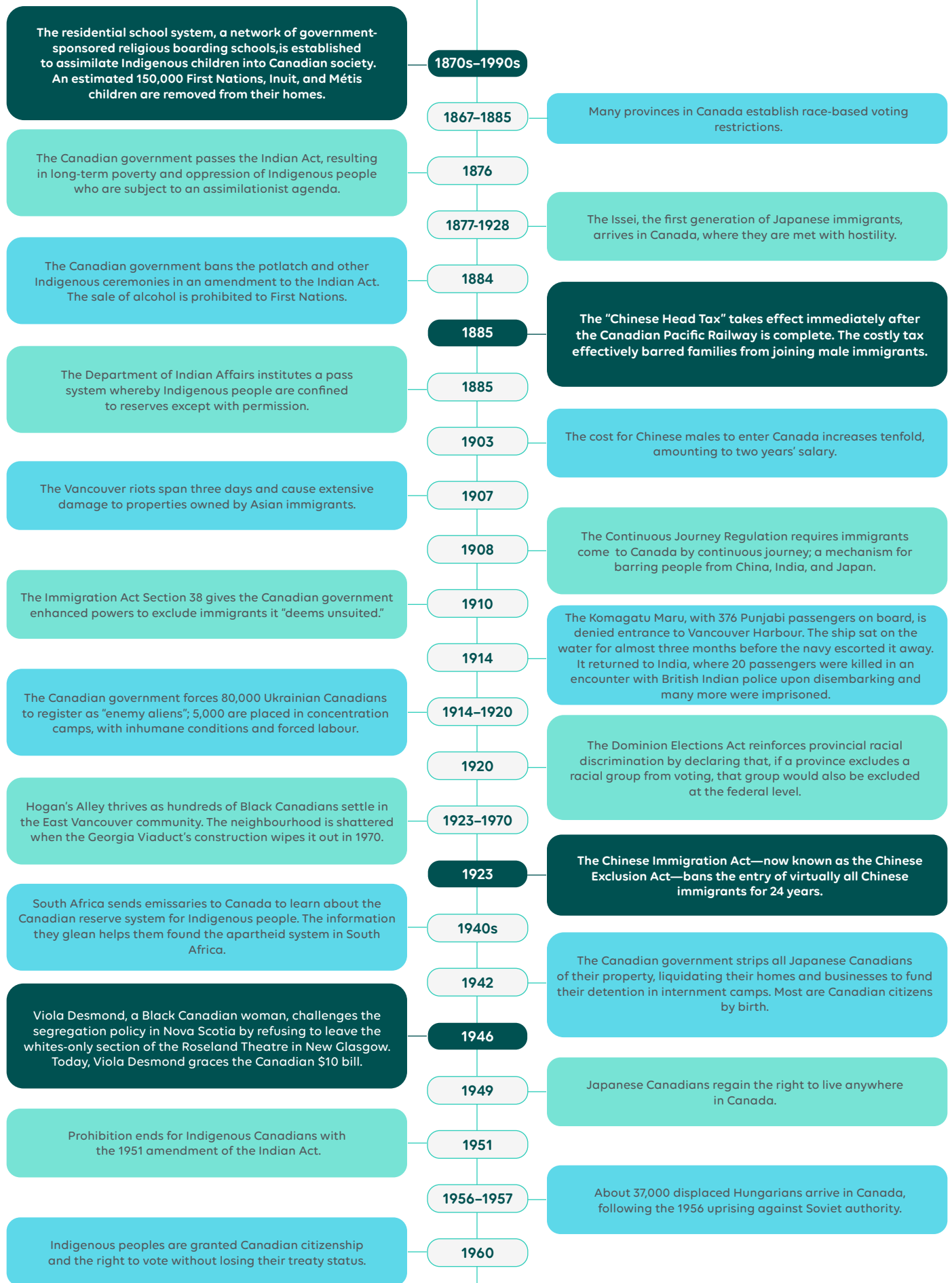
The History of Racism in Canada

As Canadians, we often assert our distinctness and imagine ourselves as removed from or even evolved beyond the racist behaviours we observe in other countries. For Canadians who have never personally experienced systemic racism, it's easy to deny its existence in Canada. But discrimination has a significant pedigree in our country; the history of racism runs long and cuts deeply.

Diversity in Canada is continuing to increase. Today, one in four Canadians is first or second generation. There are some areas in Canada where previous minority groups are now the majority. To move forward advocating for equality for all, we must take a moment to examine the events of our past, acknowledge them, and promise to actively do what we can to ensure we don't ever repeat them.

Let's take a look.





Terminology and language

Many people lack a clear understanding of the true meaning and definition of racism and the terminology associated with it. To succeed in our journey to end discrimination together, we must start with a common language.

Advocate: Someone who publicly supports the cause of anti-racism and uses their power to amplify anti-racist actions.

Ally: Someone who recognizes their privilege and works in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for justice. Allies understand that ending racism benefits everyone.

Anti-black racism: Prejudice, attitudes, and stereotypes directed at people of African descent and rooted in their unique history of enslavement. Anti-black racism is entrenched in Canadian society, yet is not visible to all. It manifests in a lack of opportunities/employment, poverty, and overrepresentation in the criminal-justice system.

Anti-racism: Actively opposing racism by advocating for political, economic, or social change. Approach tends to be individual.

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour, having a specific relationship with systemic racism.

Cultural misappropriation: Occurs when a cultural fixture of a marginalized culture is mimicked or recreated—and, above all, commodified—by the dominant culture against the will of the original community. Distinct from neutral appropriation.

Cultural racism: Representations, messages, and stories conveying the idea that behaviours and values associated with “whiteness” are automatically better or more reflective of norms than those associated with racially defined groups. Comes with implicit or explicit racialized ideals and values (e.g., of what is beautiful or what the colour “nude” means).

Discrimination: Treating someone unfairly by placing a burden on them or denying them privilege because of their race or other identity marker.

Implicit bias: Negative assumptions that people unknowingly hold and express automatically, which may undermine their stated commitments to equality and fairness. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is often used to measure implicit bias.

Intersectionality: The interconnectivity or overlap of characterizations such as race, gender, class, (dis)ability, leading to compounded challenges and vulnerabilities and/or oppression.

Microaggression: Everyday verbal or nonverbal slights (intentional or unintentional), which may communicate hostile messages to marginalized persons.

Movement building: The efforts of social-change agents to engage power holders and the broader society to address systemic problems or injustices and promote an alternative vision or solution.

Multicultural competency: Process of learning about and becoming allies with people from other cultures. Key element is respect for how others live.

Oppression: Systemic subjugation of a social group by a more powerful social group for social, economic, or political gain. Both oppressors and oppressed persons are socialized to play their roles. OPPRESSION = POWER + PREJUDICE.

Privilege: Unearned social power accorded by society to all members of a dominant group. Often invisible to those who have it.

Race: Social construct based on geographic, historical, political, economic, social, or cultural factors, and physical traits—none of which is legitimate classifications for groups of people.

Racial inequity: Disparity between racial groups; they are not on the same footing.

Racism: Any individual or institutional practice of treating people differently because of their colour or ethnicity. May be covert, internalized, overt, and/or systemic.

Racist policy: Any measure that produces or sustains inequity between racial groups. May be written or unwritten (law, rule, procedure, process, etc.).

Systemic or institutional racism: Patterns of behaviour, policies, or practices that are built into the social or administrative structures of an organization, perpetuating disadvantage for racialized persons. May appear neutral on the surface but have an exclusionary impact.

White supremacy: Idea (ideology) that white people and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions are superior to those of People of Colour. While most people associate the notion of “white supremacy,” with extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis, it is ever-present in our institutional and cultural assumptions about value, morality, goodness, and humanity. Drawing from critical-race theory, the term “white supremacy” also refers to a political or social system where white people enjoy structural advantages and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both collectively and individually.

Systemic racism in the workplace

Systemic discrimination is historically embedded in Canadian society. Racism is at the core of our laws, our culture, and our attitudes. It's built into our foundation and perpetuates the social and economic disparities in everything from education to healthcare to housing and employment.

Based on the most recent census data (2016) and Statistics Canada:

- Black Canadians make, on average, 25% less annual income than non-racialized Canadians.
- The gap in median wages between Black men and their counterparts in the general population has persisted over time.
- Black Canadians are far more likely than non-racialized Canadians and other visible minorities to be unemployed or underemployed.
- Black Canadians are nearly twice as likely as non-racialized Canadians to be considered low income.
- About one in five Black adults in Canada lives in a low-income situation.
- Canadians of Colour are more likely to be in temporary or unstable employment.

*We must
acknowledge
the truth
about systemic
racism.*

Black Canadians are nearly twice as likely as non-racialized Canadians to be considered low-income.

Black population

23.9%

Other visible minority

20%

Not a visible minority

12.2%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2016 Census of Population – Based on income data for 2015.

0% 2% 4% 6% 8% 10% 12% 14% 16% 18% 20% 22% 24%

How does racism show up in the workplace?

Research shows that over half of Black Canadians experience workplace discrimination on an ongoing basis. Indigenous Canadians report a similar rate. Over a quarter of Black Canadians report that this discrimination has led to them being mistreated in the workplace.

Racialized job seekers experience fewer call-backs after submitting employment applications. They may be wrongly associated with lower-paying jobs, such as entry level. Such jobs offer few to no benefits, little job security, and only the most limited opportunities for development or promotion.

In the workplace, racism presents in obvious and not-so-obvious ways. Managers may pass over racialized employees for promotion or offer less attractive contracts or salaries. They may provide more valuable feedback or greater professional development opportunities to employees they consider part of the “perfect fit” at the expense of racialized employees. These types of incidents jump to mind when we think of workplace discrimination.

But racism manifests in subtler ways, too. Microaggressions, such as insensitive comments based on racist assumptions, can be hurtful to racialized employees, especially when the statements relate to efficacy, productivity, or intelligence. Racialized employees may find themselves left out of conversations, or invited to speak last. Even the workplace décor can speak volumes. Decorating office walls with photographs of only white “star employees” and white “ideal customers” is making a big statement about its values—it’s a negative message for racialized employees that can not only make them feel less valued, but can even make them feel insecure about their employment.

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Microaggressions are often framed as jokes, which puts the onus on racialized employees to absorb negative messages while surrendering the right to protest; if they take offence, they may be accused of lacking a sense of humour. Even a positive comment can be a microaggression if it stems from a cultural stereotype (e.g., “your people must be so proud you’re a nurse”).

At the most subtle end of the spectrum, microaggressions may manifest in workplaces that are attempting to implement diversity and inclusion practices. For example, some white employees may make comments such as, “I don’t see race,” “racism isn’t a thing here,” “racism is a thing of the past,” or “racism doesn’t happen in Canada.” These assertions—even if made by well-meaning people—invalidate the experiences of marginalized employees. They are conversation enders.

We don’t need conversation enders. We need to start a conversation about workplace discrimination and keep it going. We need to do better, and we can do better.

Business leaders are being challenged with examining bias and diversity in their industries—and there’s still a lot of work to be done. Profound changes are required. What follows are steps that you, the HR professional, can take to lead the charge.

What now?

Next steps for individuals

As individuals, we can take steps toward change.

Acknowledgment

- Racism is real and systemic racism is experienced by people in Canada.
- Name it when you see it. Call out racism and discrimination.

Self-educate

- Learn as much as possible about the challenges and prejudices faced by colleagues from marginalized groups.

Take action

- Don't be a bystander to inappropriate or offensive behaviour or actions. If you observe unfairness or discrimination, question it, and take action to stop it.

Become an ally and advocate

- Learn as much as possible about the challenges and prejudices faced by colleagues from marginalized groups.

Next steps for human resources

As HR professionals, you can support change.

Reach out and check in

- Reach out to your team and the entire organization to ensure your employees are okay. Check in regularly.

Be mindful of burnout

- As awareness of racism grows, employees of colour may be asked for guidance, advice, support, and reassurance by allies.
- Be mindful of the pressure this puts on them. The burden of solving racism can't rest with one group alone; we must all work together.

Restate your position on diversity and inclusion

- Now is a great time to create, revamp, or restate your position on diversity and inclusion to the organization.

Mandate anti-bias training for HR (and managers)

- HR must be the hub of knowledge and understanding. Be aware of what bias and racism look like, and deliver training on bias and racism to employees.

Appoint/hire/contract a senior-level diversity specialist

- Diversity must be a priority, and the Chief Diversity Officer must have a seat at the decision-making table.
- Retain, grow, and develop minority talent.
- Focus on and incentivize the development and movement of minority talent currently working within your organization.

Prioritize diversity in recruitment

- Representation in recruiting brings a diversity of lived experiences, and that leads to organizational success.

Create an anti-racism toolkit

- Create employee toolkits that include pertinent, useful information, and resources for all levels of the organization.
- Ensure procedures for reporting discrimination are clear, easy to follow, and non-threatening.

Thank you

Thank you for having the courage and determination to do the work involved in combatting racism and fighting for equality—especially in the workplace.

Tools and resources

Some suggestions:

- UKG (Ultimate Kronos Group) – [Equity at Work Council](#). Sources from an interdisciplinary group of specialist thought leaders and practitioners.
- Government of Canada – Canadian Heritage – [Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy](#). Variety of resources: general, employment/income, justice, and social participation.
- Historica Canada & TD Bank – [Black History in Canada: Education Guide](#).
- Racial-Equity Tools – [Organizational Assessment Tools and Resources](#). Extensive list of tools and resources.
- Racial-Equity Tools – [Anti-Racism Glossary](#). Extensive glossary.
- [Building a Multi-Ethnic, Inclusive, and Anti-Racist Organization: Tools for Liberation Packet](#) – for Anti-Racist Activists, Allies, and Critical Thinkers.
- Columbia University Medical Center – Human Resources – [Anti-Racism Resources](#). Extensive list of resources.

About Parris Consulting

Parris Consulting is a diversity-, accessibility-, and inclusion-focused consulting firm based in Vancouver, Canada. We are dedicated to assisting organizations across North America to build equitable, diverse, and inclusive workforces. Contact Parris Consulting today to discover how we can help you create a respectful work environment free of prejudice and discrimination.