

Commentary



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Become a cheerleader or find another job: The political test in equity, diversity, and inclusiveness initiatives

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Who you vote for, and what you believe politically, is not supposed to determine whether you get a job. And yet, under a different guise, this kind of political test is being implemented in workplaces all across Canada.

In my own industry, the world of universities, employers are specifically writing into job requirements a demand that applicants support certain political beliefs. This isn't how it's being advertised, of course. Instead, the façade that hides the political test is the much more saleable idea of EDI – that is, equity, diversity, and inclusiveness. Employers require candidates to submit statements professing their commitment to EDI and perhaps highlighting what experience they have in promoting these values.

Universities aren't alone. Many school boards, for example, are introducing political requirements for the hiring of teachers, principals, and vice-principals, as former teacher Chantal Pfahl has been extensively documenting (Pfahl 2023).

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You'll find the same initiatives in the legal profession and from many private sector employers. In other instances, it might be professional associations now re-interpreting previously neutral standards of professional conduct in such a way as to make actions of those who hold certain political beliefs seem “unprofessional” according to this new interpretation.

This seems to be what happened in the case of Jordan Peterson and the College of Psychologists of Ontario. If you deem certain political beliefs – a dislike of Justin Trudeau or support for movements like the Freedom Convoy – to be “harmful” or “dangerous,” then you can claim that publicly stating those beliefs is akin to acting unprofessionally.

That this has happened with, so far, relatively little public uproar seems to be because the introduction of EDI training and requirements into many workplaces across Canada is a classic case of bait and switch. Proponents of EDI know that the vast majority of Canadians find racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination to be wrong. While there are plenty of individual instances of bigotry, on a broad social level, Canadians view discrimination as an evil.

Given this widespread social agreement, it might seem like common sense to introduce training into the workplace. The trick is that this is the bait. The bait relies on this shared appetite to get rid of discrimination.

The switch comes in when EDI proponents radically alter what they mean by discrimination, profoundly changing previous assumptions in ways that are still highly contentious and debatable. And then they propose sweeping new methods for how to eradicate bias – techniques that many reasonable observers conclude could backfire and actually make racism and sexism worse.

Potentially the most significant feature of this new political era is that these ideas are being enshrined into job requirements and that job candidates are being required to actively explain why they agree. To get many jobs across the country, you effectively need to become a cheerleader for a potentially illiberal version of so-called progressive politics.

As someone who writes on these issues in the university world, I frequently receive messages from young academics (without tenure, on part-time contracts, or graduate students) worried about their career prospects. They're facing job applications and requirements that demand political loyalty. What should they do?

One young academic recently showed me an advertisement for a Lecturer in Entrepreneurship at the University of Windsor. Not surprisingly, the university wants candidates who are qualified to teach business fundamentals. But that's not all. Candidates also need to submit "a one-page statement of commitment to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization" (University of Windsor 2022).

You might ask what on earth "decolonization" has to do with entrepreneurship. And that would be an excellent question – for the real answer is: nothing. The fact is, though, an applicant's commitment to decolonization could matter just as much as their education, research expertise, or work experience.

Or how about the other academic who wrote to me of their experience at the hands of a small cadre of activists within their department? The part-time instructor had the temerity to suggest, in the radical summer of 2020, that the department should remain politically neutral and not give in to some students' demands that they make public political proclamations.

“*An applicant's commitment to decolonization could matter just as much as their education.*”

When a full-time position eventually came up, the academic had put a target on their back. And when hiring is done by committee and voted upon by the whole department, they effectively alienated a big enough swathe to make getting hired impossible. This had nothing to do with their professional qualifications, and everything to do with their unwillingness to accept the new political demands of activists.

When a colleague and I surveyed Canadian professors last year on their experiences in the workplace, a number of academics spoke about how they could not speak openly about their criticisms of EDI and decolonization initiatives for fear of social or professional censure (Dummitt and Patterson 2022). They fear being attacked as old school racists – and with good reason. That is exactly the attack that does often come. In fact, even our survey that dared to ask about these issues was attacked as racist by those who suggested we wanted to roll back progress (Dubinsky and Perry 2022).

This, though, is really the bait and switch in action.

It's important to lay out how different, and how political, are the changing ideas about discrimination encoded in the new EDI and "decolonization" initiatives. These are not simply old-school, and much agreed upon, schemes to end discrimination in the workplace. There are four major changes being implemented in the new EDI program. Some of these changes have merit (in certain circumstances) but others are either not supported by evidence, or are likely to make inter-group relations *worse* rather than better.

What are the key changes?

First, the big shift is to talk about equity and not equality. Proponents of equity have seemingly reasonable arguments. They say that equality of opportunity doesn't go far enough, and some people start off from such disadvantaged positions that they need extra help. You (or certainly your kids) have probably seen the cartoon that shows a tall adult and a short child trying to see over a wall. The wall doesn't obscure the view of the tall adult but the little kid is staring at bricks. So the "equity" solution in this case is to get the kid a stool, to give them a boost.

All of this seems eminently fair. And in certain instances, it can be. However, there are many debatable features of the equity approach.

For instance, equity advocates are fixated on any and all statistical disparities that exist between identity groups. If a disparity exists – let's say there are fewer female than male engineers – the equity approach is to assume that this is evidence of discrimination. Then special programs or perhaps affirmative action jobs should be created to give advantages to women to make the proportion 50-50. That this could mean discriminating against male candidates doesn't matter. After all, the equity approach assumes that they are already unfairly receiving an advantage.

Equity advocates largely aren't interested in asking genuinely open-ended questions about *why* disparities exist. In fact, to ask for evidence of discrimination can be interpreted to mean that you are discriminatory yourself. If you begin with the assumption that some groups are historically disadvantaged or marginalized, then when you see a statistical disparity, you already have a ready-made explanation. It simply *has* to be because of discrimination.

The equity framework assumes an ideal society where every school, workplace, and each job category is an exact replica of broad social group differences. That

this is entirely unrealistic and has never existed for any society doesn't seem to matter. Equity, in this sense (though not in others, as we'll see below), assumes that humans are a blank slate and have no real group differences that might influence how their lives turn out or the choices they make.

The second major change in new EDI regimes is the focus on what are said to be subtle or unconscious forms of discrimination. The focus is no longer on clear discriminatory actions like racist name-calling or excluding people of certain identities from job opportunities. Instead, the new regime focuses on so-called "microaggressions." This could be something like asking a non-white person "where are you from?" According to the new EDI thinking, it doesn't matter if the person asking the question is merely curious and doesn't intend to be offensive. Intent is irrelevant. All that matters is how someone interprets what they are free to define as a microaggression depending on their own subjective feelings.

The trick with the subtle-racism/microaggression concept is that the examples provided *could* be discriminatory. But they also might not be. No matter: in the new world of EDI – where intent is irrelevant – discrimination is the assumed norm. The final arbiter is the person who claims to be offended. That this opens up an opportunity for widespread abuse should be clear to anyone with even a modicum of familiarity with human nature.

There is also the problem that tests to detect "unconscious" or "implicit" bias are unreliable. If you take the test one day and receive one result, you could take the same test the next day and receive an entirely different result. What's more, it's not at all clear what the test measures. There is no link between a finding of "unconscious bias" and how people act in the real world. This isn't even to mention the fact that decades of research have shown that EDI training initiatives have no proven track record of improving relations in the workplace – and may even make things worse (al-Gharbi 2020).

Third, the new EDI regime also wants to *accentuate* differences. It is based on a critique of the "colour-blind" approach to discrimination. The new EDI approach radically reverses this focus and instead wants to emphasize what are said to be the unique perspectives or the real "lived experiences" of those who are said to be marginalized and oppressed. To fail to account for these differences is now presented as discriminatory.

This is the basis behind creating a new allegedly-progressive kind of segregation. Workplace trainings are now being presented to different groups depending on

their skin-colour or their identity groups. It sounds better if they're called "affinity groups," but this is essentially segregation based on identity characteristics.

The problem here is that this approach is directly contradicted by significant findings in social science that suggest the best way to minimize conflict between groups is to emphasize what people share in common. Humans have very strong in-group preferences. If you focus on differences, you are essentially inviting divisions to emerge.

You can't just not discriminate; you must loudly proclaim your loyalty.

It should be clear then, that for all of the reasonable rhetoric and good intentions, there are serious reasons why some might be skeptical about new approaches to EDI. It represents a radical departure from what has come before. And it is in no way beyond politics to such an extent that it can harmlessly be written into job requirements as if it is not subject to debate and disagreement.

And yet the final new element of the EDI approach goes far beyond any of what I've outlined above. For critical EDI activists now claim that it isn't enough that you don't discriminate personally. It isn't sufficient to just *not* be racist. You must now be actively anti-racist. You have to *do* something to show that you support actively these values. You can't quietly and neutrally treat everyone equally. Instead, you must be a cheerleader for the new regime.

This is the basis for writing all of these schemes into the workplace and requiring job candidates publicly profess their belief. You can't just not discriminate; you must loudly proclaim your loyalty.

Most employees or job candidates are stuck in a bind. Either you submit to the new regime or risk not getting a job. It is asking a lot of any citizen to risk their livelihood – their ability to pay their mortgage, feed their children – in order to criticize a set of politicized workplace trainings. What's more, the general principle behind this training, one of inclusiveness and non-discrimination, is widely shared. That's the bait in this elaborate bait and switch. And yet if you dare to criticize the new and more debatable radical EDI approaches, you're bound to be accused of being a racist or sexist.

That's why there is so much importance to those few instances where cases leap to the public stage. This is the significance of someone like Jordan Peterson fighting back against the College of Psychologists of Ontario. Whatever anyone thinks about Peterson personally or his views, it's cases like his that profoundly matter in fighting back against the system of political indoctrination that is being encoded into workplaces across the country.

There's a reason that when we go to vote, we retreat to behind a blind and mark our beliefs where no one else can see. Some people might be happy to put out a lawn sign and proclaim their loyalties. But others just want to get along with their neighbours without discussing politics. We need the right to keep our beliefs private. No one should be forced to be a cheerleader. [MLI](#)

About the author



Christopher Dummitt is Professor of Canadian history at Trent University. He is the author and editor of four books including *Unbuttoned: A History of Mackenzie King's Secret Life* which was a finalist for a number of major book prizes including the Shaughnessy Cohen Prize as best book on Canadian politics from the Writers' Trust. He is also the host of the Canadian history podcast *1867 & All That*. Along with Zachary Patterson he

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