

Racial discrimination in the workplace

Racial discrimination is any action, intentional or not, that singles out people based on their race and causes them to be treated differently. Racial discrimination in the workplace is a form of workplace harassment and is prohibited under Ontario's *Human Rights Code*.

Workplace harassment is defined in Ontario's *Occupational Health and Safety Act* as "engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker, in a workplace, that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome."

Explain dangers

Racial discrimination can often be subtle, such as being assigned less desirable jobs or tasks. More obvious instances of racial discrimination can be:

- Verbal (e.g., jokes, slurs)
- Visual (e.g., gestures, mocking)
- Physical (e.g., intimidation, exclusion)
- Environmental (e.g., graffiti, posters).

Racial discrimination negatively affects workers and the work environment.

- It can damage people's physical and mental health.
- It can decrease productivity and undermine the company culture.
- It can hurt a business financially because of work disruptions, decreased productivity, and the costs of potential fines and legal action.
- It can negatively affect the relationship between coworkers and between workers and management.
- It can ruin the company's reputation with clients and undermine hiring efforts.

Identify controls

Employers must take measures to prevent workplace harassment, which includes racial discrimination. They are legally required to:

- Develop a written harassment policy
- Post it in a conspicuous location
- Provide information and instruction on the policy to workers.

Workers must comply with all company policies and co-operate with efforts to investigate and resolve reports of workplace discrimination.

As a worker, you can't always control the behaviour of others, but you can control your own behaviour by:

- Acting respectfully towards others while at work and during work-related activities
- Respecting the diversity of the workplace and learning to appreciate the unique qualities and strengths of a multicultural workforce
- Not engaging in or tolerating workplace racism, whether intentional or not
- Challenging any racist and discriminatory policies and practices at your workplace
- Speaking out against racist acts such as jokes, slurs, graffiti, or name-calling
- Educating yourself on the best ways to support those who are affected by racist actions and attitudes
- Challenging yourself by considering how some of your own assumptions might be influenced by racial stereotypes
- Becoming an ally by actively supporting racialized groups, which can help strengthen relationships in the workplace
- Reporting incidents of workplace racism and discrimination to HR or a manager.

Demonstrate

Review your company's workplace harassment policy with your workers. Show them the location where it's posted. Be clear about who the policy applies to (subcontractors, temporary workers, etc.) and what the consequences will be if they violate it.

Go over the steps to report an instance of workplace racial discrimination, explain how the investigation will be handled, and point out that workers are protected from any reprisal as a result of a report made in good faith.

NOTE: If your company does not have a harassment policy in place, visit IHSA's Workplace Violence and Harassment Toolkit for resources to help you develop one:
www.ihsa.ca/topics_hazards/wpvh_toolkit.aspx