

Strategies for Recognizing and Addressing Tokenism

Many employers have committed to creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces. To help employers strengthen their diversity initiatives, this information sheet explains and suggests strategies to counter tokenism in the workplace.

What is Tokenism?

Tokenism creates the impression of diversity and fairness through symbolic initiatives. Without implementing meaningful strategies to elevate the contributions and decision-making capacities of employees from equity-seeking groups, recruitment, retention, and representation efforts may provide only the semblance of equity and inclusion.

Tokenism's worst manifestation occurs when employers intentionally use the presence of an Indigenous person in the workplace to deflect accusations of racism and discrimination. Even well-intentioned employers, however, might contribute to tokenism, where Indigenous employees might be put into uncomfortable or exploitative positions or assumed to be representative spokespersons of their communities or experts on all Indigenous people and Indigenous cultures.

Recognizing Tokenism

It's not always easy to see tokenism in action. Employers may consider the extent to which employees from equity-seeking groups are empowered and respected in decision-making, public communications, and maintaining their personal boundaries. The following questions promote such reflection:

- What is the demographic make-up of executive, supervisory, and leadership teams?
 - Who is given decision-making authority and final say?
 - How are networking opportunities accessed and distributed?
- How, when, and why are Indigenous employees brought into company branding, public relations, and campaigns?
 - Does this public identity accurately reflect workplace demographics and company culture?
- Are Indigenous employees given identity-related tasks that fall beyond their job descriptions?
 - How is this additional labour recognized, compensated, and supported?
 - Who initiated or requested this work?

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