

Hidden gatekeepers: How hiring bias affects workers in the food service industry

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Businesses across Canada have been bemoaning the lack of qualified workers across numerous industries, [including those traditionally viewed as lower-skill occupations](#).

This issue has been ongoing for the past few years but came to a head in 2021 as the country eased its way out of the pandemic. Food service establishments, in particular, [struggled to find suitable employees](#) while trying to return to business as usual.

In response to these staffing challenges, [temporary foreign worker and provincial nominee programs](#) were looked to as [convenient stop-gap](#) solutions.

Temporary foreign workers account for a [relatively large proportion of workers in accommodation and food services](#) compared to other industries. Food service work is often precarious, characterized by part-time, temporary and low-paid positions.

Still, despite these efforts, many positions remained unfilled. This raises an important question: are these labor shortages real, or are there barriers preventing certain workers from securing interviews and filling employment gaps? Our forthcoming research set out to address this question.

Are you the right 'fit?'

Hiring managers in the food service industry often emphasize the importance of finding the right "fit" when hiring new employees. But does everyone have the same chance to fit in?

Our forthcoming research in [The Economic and Labor Relations Review](#) found that many hiring managers have set ideas about what makes an ideal employee. These ideals are usually related to a candidate's race, country of origin, immigration status, Indigeneity, gender and physical appearance.

Using interviews with food service employers and workers, along with

results from resume call backs, our analysis suggests the notion of a fit employee functions as a gatekeeper by providing opportunities for some while excluding others. Labor market opportunities and disadvantages are created by these notions of who is the right fit.

This is particularly important to consider in light of the [high unemployment rates for Indigenous Peoples](#) and [wage disparities between men and women in food services](#). There is more going on beneath the surface than meets the eye.

Gender and 'pretty privilege'

Women are [over-represented, yet underpaid](#), in the food service industry. They are more likely to be hired in better paid customer-facing roles, such as serving tables, because they are [perceived as being more polite, organized and better at providing customer service](#).

However, [this type of job comes at a cost](#) for women. They are expected to spend money on personal grooming and face intense pressure to present themselves in ways male customers find appealing.

One female interviewee recalled a comment made by a restaurant owner about [female employees](#): "If you don't feel like you should be Instagram ready, like taking an Instagram picture, then you shouldn't come to work."

Our findings suggest employer biases toward physical appearance and gendered social attributes can outweigh the qualifications listed on job seekers' resumes.

How race impacts hiring

For many people, food service jobs represent an opportunity to get into the workforce. These roles, often viewed as entry-level positions, are frequently [used as stepping stones for future employment](#).

However, it's important to note that not everyone seeking positions in food service are doing so as a form of training—many simply need a job, full stop.

Who gets hired for these jobs is important because those who are unable to secure entry-level service positions could have their long-term career prospects impacted. This, in turn, could compound [already existing labor market inequalities](#). But the reality of how this actually happens isn't quite so simple.

Despite the [perception that food service work is "easier" for immigrants and racialized workers](#) to break into, our research found that [racialized workers had fewer chances overall to be hired](#), especially in front-of-house roles.

In some cases, racialized workers may be [hired as a "token minority" or they may be hired preferentially](#) if their ethnicity appears to match the type of food being served. In both cases, race is treated as a commodity by the employer and diversity is seen as a favorable business decision.

One food service worker told us:

"The only advantage you have is tokenism because it can be an advantage that you have a higher chance of getting hired at a place that doesn't have visible minorities."

Of those who were hired, they tended to be pushed into back-of-house roles where they didn't interact directly with customers or earn tips. The quality of jobs immigrants and racialized workers had tended to be

lower, with unsteady hours and low wages.

Indigenous workers

The challenges facing Indigenous job applicants were even more stark. Our analysis suggests Indigenous Peoples are acutely impacted by the notion of fit in Canada, which often serves as a pretext for excluding them from employment opportunities.

Racism continues to perpetuate the [discrimination and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples](#) in the labor market in Canada.

Indigenous workers can be [stigmatized by stereotypes](#) that characterize them as being prone to criminal behavior and substance use. These stereotypes led one of the hiring managers we interviewed to say they wouldn't hire Indigenous applicants.

Our research found that, when Indigenous applicants were hired, employers were more likely to place them into low-paid and low-status roles, such as dishwashing, that had fewer chances for advancement. The Indigenous workers we spoke to used a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with the racist attitudes they faced, including trying to "turn a blind eye to it."

Policy isn't enough on its own

Anti-discrimination legislation, by itself, [is not enough to prevent biases against certain job applicants](#). Few employees have the resources to be able to contest unfair or illegal treatment, and even if they are able to complain through employment standards processes or a civil lawsuit, [discrimination in the hiring process is difficult to prove](#).

Government subsidies, training programs, [work experience](#) and education are also unlikely to overcome the biases that shape employment outcomes. The reason why racialized, Indigenous or newcomer applicants are less likely to be hired is not because of training deficiencies. Rather, hiring managers act as gatekeepers by enforcing their own preferences and biases about who will fit into their organization.

Put another way, job experience, education and extracurricular activities are easily overshadowed by biases that employers use to deem certain candidates as a suitable fit. Qualified job-seekers are often ignored or considered for other occupations in the [food](#) service industry as a result.

Unconscious bias training and initiatives [fall short of affecting meaningful change if the broader system goes unexamined](#). Real transformation [requires focused anti-racist programming](#) that involves actively challenging and changing racist policies, practices and attitudes—not simply paying lip service to diversity or anti-discrimination campaigns.

[Employer concerns about genuine labor market shortages in certain sectors are real](#), but in some respects, these problems are made worse by notions about fitting in that turn otherwise qualified candidates away before landing an interview.

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