

Adecco

Uplifting Asian Canadian Workers



Of Canada's 38 million-strong population, 18% is of Asian origin, and the continent looks set to remain the main source of immigrants to Canada (currently over 60%) for many years to come. As such, the community represents a critical talent pool and a potent growth engine for Canada's post-Covid recovery.

Yet, employers lack awareness of the issues plaguing this multifaceted community, even as they search for the skills that many Asian Canadians have in abundance—and the dollars that this growing consumer segment has in its pocket.

Like other marginalized populations, the community has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and the resulting increase in unemployment. But workers of Asian heritage have also been grappling with an explosion of unjust guilt and unprovoked violence. Misinformation has spread, and old stereotypes have resurfaced.

Hate has crossed over into some workplaces, and overt racism and violence are not the extent of it. Layered, subtle and complex, prejudice doesn't always come from a place of malice. But subtle microaggressions like attributing "smartness" and pathologizing communication styles make work unbearable for some. Asian Canadian women especially have left the workforce en masse, and employers struggle to lure them back. The result? Sidelined workers don't reach their potential, and employers miss out on great talent.

This whitepaper aims to foster employers' understanding of the Asian Canadian worker experience and help them support

this diverse community. We explore:

- Who is the Asian Canadian community?
- What are some of the barriers and biases?
- How to roll back discrimination and elevate workers of Asian heritage.

May is Asian Heritage Month in Canada, and this month (and every month), we want to help employers tap into the ingenuity and diversity of this vast talent pool and help every Asian Canadian worker achieve their full potential. So, let's dive in!

Who is the Asian Canadian community?

Asian Canadians are a diffuse and multifaceted group whose rich contributions are woven deep into the cultural tapestry of our country. The community encompasses multiple waves of immigrants and numerous countries, languages, religions and ethnicities, covering a vast swath of the world's landmass. It includes everyone from recent immigrants to Canadians whose families have lived here for centuries.

Canadians of Chinese heritage form the largest segment of the Asian Canadian population (over 1 million), followed by Canadians of Indian (713k), Filipino (327k), Vietnamese (151k), Korean (102k), Japanese (85k), and Pakistani (74k) descent, and those with roots dating back to several other Asian countries. [1]

Some 'Asian Canadians' struggle to identify with a label that spans the world's largest continent; many feel it masks, and often minimizes, the various challenges of the community's component groups. Avoid lumping minority groups together. *(A Japanese Canadian man will have very different challenges to a Vietnamese Canadian woman, for example.)* Take the time to respect and understand differences. It's a tiny investment compared to the return: an open and inclusive work environment with the full spectrum of talent contributing their ideas, efforts and energy.



What are some of the barriers and biases faced by Asian Canadian workers?

Given its complex and composite history, anti-Asian discrimination is ever evolving, and false narratives rise and fall. But dismantling discrimination starts with dismantling stereotypes, so we must stay alert and keep learning. Part of that is learning to recognize and call out dangerous stereotypes, even when it makes you feel uncomfortable. To aid that learning journey, here are some of the most persistent and pernicious forms of prejudice:

The model minority

American sociologist William Peterson coined the phrase “model minority” in a *New York Times* article in the 1960s, and the stereotype quickly permeated the Canadian consciousness. It pigeonholes Asian Canadians as a uniformly successful group known for hard work, education and obedience. But, like other stereotypes, this seemingly “positive” characterization denies the humanity of individuals, pits minority against minority, and downplays Canada’s troubled anti-Asian history.

The forgotten minorities

There is another side to the “model minority” myth. Socioeconomic outcomes within the Asian Canadian community are stark. Japanese Canadian males earn 105 cents for every dollar non-racialized Canadians make, while West Asian males earn only 0.71 (*West Asian women only 0.51*). [2] Many vulnerable Asian Canadians work low-wage jobs, often in the grey economy, and the community was overrepresented in front-line roles during the pandemic.

(The largest COVID-19 outbreak linked to a single facility in North America was in Alberta, where 70 percent of workers were Filipino Canadians.[3])

The bamboo ceiling

Although East Asians make up a large and highly skilled part of the workforce, they’re underrepresented in leadership. A decade ago, research from the University of Toronto [4] found that East Asians who displayed leadership qualities such as dominance and candor were being “punished” for challenging the stereotype of being weak, quiet and subordinate. Chinese Canadians are still massively underrepresented [5] in Canadian C-suites, confirming the persistence of the “bamboo ceiling” today.

Good at math

A few years ago, a lawsuit accused Harvard University of giving poorer personality ratings to Asian-American applicants,[6] lining up with the stereotype of East Asians as being obsessed with academics and lacking interpersonal skills. Dehumanization has always been at the centre of racism, and portraying people of Asian heritage as hyper-intelligent number crunchers with robot-like dedication is a prime example. Whether due to family pressures or external microaggressions, the stereotype of the math whizz kid makes some Asian Canadian talents feel crowbarred into careers in STEM and discounted from more creative opportunities.

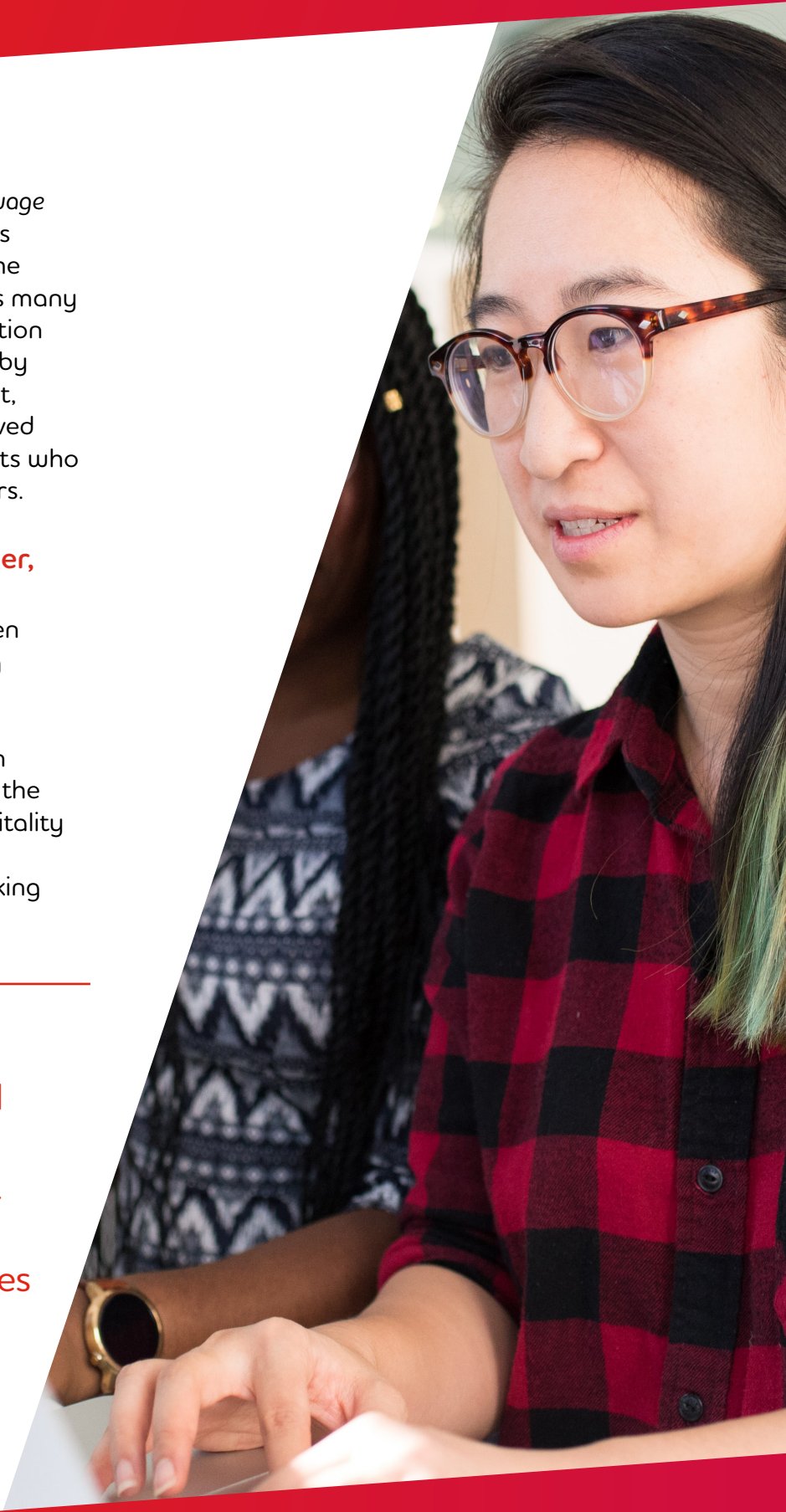
The perpetual foreigner

'Where did you learn to speak the language so well?' Such microaggressions are as widespread as they are pernicious. The perpetual foreigner stereotype leaves many feeling that their patriotism is in question and that they will never be accepted by some aspects of Canadian society. Yet, many come from families that have lived here for generations, with descendants who fought for the country in multiple wars.

The Geisha Girl, the Lotus Flower, and other harmful tropes

Gendered stereotypes of Asian women include depictions as of them as being caring and submissive, or exotic and highly sexualized objects. Such tropes have a damaging impact on women in the workplace, especially in areas like the health and beauty sector, or the hospitality industry, where they are expected to expend their emotional labour on making clients feel “special.”

Despite the ubiquity and durability of these harmful stereotypes, many people and places of employment are unaware of how they may perpetuate these biases in Canadian workplaces. It's time to change that.



How to push back against discrimination and elevate Asian Canadian workers

Creating a welcoming workplace for Asian Canadian workers doesn't need to mean radically overhauling your organization or investing lots of money. It's about taking the time to understand the issues and reflect on how they might be showing up in your organization. Here's what employers can do to boost equity and inclusion for workers of Asian heritage:

Keep Asian Canadian workers safe

During the pandemic period, hate incidents skyrocketed across the country. At one point, Vancouver was dubbed the anti-Asian hate crime capital of North America. Sadly, the hate doesn't stop when people get to work. To keep workers safe, employers may consider providing alarms, setting up an anonymous hotline or providing rides to and from work. And rolling out bystander intervention training can empower co-workers to help in the event of witnessing a hate-motivated incident.

Protect their mental health

We all know about the havoc COVID-19 wreaked on workers' mental health. Now, imagine adding to that the unfair blame heaped on your community and the fear of mounting physical attacks. These overlapping pressures are taking an outsized toll on mental health among Asian Canadian workers. [7] But some groups, particularly East Asians, are less likely to seek mental health services. Language difficulties, stigma and the unavailability of culturally appropriate treatment combine to exclude workers from the support they need. Employers should connect Asian Canadian

workers with culturally sensitive care and check in regularly to show they care.

Set up an ally network

Don't let victims deal with everyday racism alone. Ally networks are a powerful force in protecting vulnerable colleagues, enforcing anti-discrimination policies and fostering positive connections in the workplace. And they're easy and low-cost to set up. Allyship can be as simple as discreetly checking in on colleagues or disarming racist jokes.

Give them opportunities to lead

What does a leader look like? We all have an image in our heads, and it's often of a white 'alpha' male. All humans have these preconceptions; they're a big part of why 'the bamboo ceiling' is a thing. Promotion decisions are too often based on intangibles and biases such as appearance or "presence." Employers can turn the tide by re-evaluating what makes a great leader (*hint: they don't need to be an extrovert*) and replacing subjective judgements with objective measures such as aptitude or achievement.

Disaggregate your data

Your recruitment diversity figures are great, so you can relax, right? Wrong. A closer look at your numbers could reveal a more complicated picture. You might notice a concentration of some groups in technical areas. Or an imbalance in which workers make it to management. Dig into your data to identify any specific challenges Asian Canadian workers face in your workplace and take action to elevate anyone getting left behind.

Be zero-tolerant

Create a zero-tolerance policy for all forms of discrimination and have top leadership champion it. Build accountability around it by having new employees sign up for it as part of the onboarding process and requiring all employees to re-sign annually. Spell out what you expect from employees. Include definitions of racism, microaggressions and discrimination, and outline any disciplinary action for non-compliance.

Learn people's names

Our names are part of our identity. Name bungling makes people feel unimportant, while having to swap Asian names for more Western-sounding (and easily pronounced) ones makes people feel less like themselves. Learn how to pronounce your Asian colleagues' names correctly. Make an effort! It's not a big ask.

Educate your workforce

Eliminating discrimination is a business opportunity. DEI training can help build a workplace culture rooted in inclusion, and many employers have been doing so successfully for years. Include anti-Asian issues in any training and mention the specific stereotypes and discrimination facing these groups.

Practice culturally competent management

Culturally competent managers create an environment that allows *all* employees to thrive. They learn how culture can affect behaviour in the workplace. They take time to understand the challenges. Leaders should be aware of the impact anti-Asian sentiment can have on:

- **Hiring:** Workers from certain Asian cultures may understate their qualifications, leading to “poor performance” in interviews. Managers can help by asking the same set of interview questions to all candidates and holding review panels to weed out any subjectivity that may have crept in along the way. Taking notes during interviews can help managers keep hiring decisions objective.
- **Meetings:** Many employees may communicate indirectly, particularly in conflict situations or when giving feedback. It's not a sign of a lack of knowledge or passion. Instead, the employee may be showing respect or seeking to help others save face. Make sure everyone gets heard by providing alternative ways to share opinions, such as one-on-one conversations or written forms.
- **Recognition:** Some employees may not like to stand out as individuals and prefer recognition as part of a team rather than as a lone star.
- **Promotions:** Pursuing a promotion can feel like arrogance to some Asian Canadian employees. Managers should ensure leadership pipelines reflect the full diversity of the workforce by regularly checking in with employees to discuss growth goals and opportunities.
- **Performance:** Some workers will be overly humble in self-evaluation and performance reviews. Managers need to be aware of this tendency and adapt accordingly. Objective performance measures applied consistently are vital.

There is no simple solution to anti-Asian discrimination in the workplace. And no one-size-fits-all strategy that employers can drag and drop from one company to another. You'll have to keep listening to your people, try new things out, see what's working, and—only then—roll them out more widely.





At Adecco, we believe that building diverse and inclusive teams is our surest bet as we tackle an unpredictable future. Recognizing and celebrating the unique strengths of Asian Canadian workers is a critical part of that.

Companies seeking to be an employer of choice for the Asian Canadian community must go beyond cultural celebrations. They need to understand—and repel—the barriers and stereotypes that hold the community back and put it at risk.

We believe in the power of work, and we won't rest until Asian Canadians are fairly represented across the full spectrum of opportunity, from the C-suite to the creative industries and everything in between.

This month and every month, we honour the brilliance and ingenuity of this vibrant community.

Adecco. Making the future work for everyone.

- [1] <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/asian-canadians/>
- [2] <https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2019/12/Canada's%20Colour%20Coded%20Income%20Inequality.pdf>
- [3] <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/may-2020/canadas-covid-19-blind-spots-on-race-immigration-and-labour/>
- [4] <http://www.rotman.utoronto.ca/facbios/file/Berdahl%20&%20Min%20CDEMP%202012.pdf>
- [5] <https://cpac-canada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Underrepresentation-of-Chinese-Canadian-Leadership-in-the-Greater-Toronto-Area.pdf>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/15/harvard-discrimination-case-personal-rating-system>
- [7] <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00077-eng.htm>