



United Nations Association in Canada
Association canadienne pour les Nations Unies

Human Rights Day
Time for Canada to Seize the Diversity Advantage in the Workplace

December 10 marks Human Rights Day and the eve of the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Canadians should know and be very proud of the formative role one of our own, John Humphreys – a New Brunswick native, played in drafting of this inspiring, revolutionary and moving document. But the day marks more than a document. And the concept of human rights is not just for countries who only know basic human rights because of their absence.

It may seem more like a challenge than a freedom to you to punch in at work on these cold, dark winter mornings. But let Human Rights Day serve as a reminder that simply holding that job is a right reserved for all of us as Canadians. A right adopted as part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

The Declaration covers our right to cast a vote in an election, buy a house and even go to a movie. It prohibits discrimination based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, national or social origin, property, birth, opinion or other status. Although the UDHR is not law, it is a strong statement of the rights the UN believes countries should provide to each and every one of their citizens, and Canada took the suggestion more than two decades ago putting it into law. You can find these laws enshrined in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the Canadian Human Rights Act (1977).

But just because it has been on paper as law for more than twenty years, does not guarantee that all these rights – and their spirit -- are consistently extended to every Canadian. The United Nations Association in Canada's "A Sense of Belonging" initiative has found gaps between the promises of the Canadian Charter and everyday living for many. This diversity programme works in nine communities across the country to target issues of racism and discrimination and promotes integration based on community- developed plans.

In roundtable discussions from Yellowknife to St. John's, visible minorities and groups working with them report local businesses unable or unwilling to seize the diversity advantage. We heard about inadequate 'diversity training' offered as a band-aid approach to welcoming new employees into the work environment, while ignoring that many businesses do not reflect the make up of the communities from which they prosper. The literature is clear that there is a positive effect on the bottom line to have a diverse workforce – and we know many Canadian companies who are leading on this. There is much work to do, however, to get this message out to small and medium sized enterprises as well.

Ultimately, Canada is a leader in enshrining human rights in law and in fact: a great country, whose greatness lies in the resources of 'newcomers' -- which at some point means each of us. The recent census data from Stats Canada reminds us how our future is tied to being an attractive future home to new Canadians. This can only be so if we continue to develop, build and evaluate our tools – from the documents and laws of human rights – to innovations in hiring and extending warm welcomes to the new face of Canada in the workforce. We must get over the protectionism often times implicit in restrictions on those with foreign credentials – for jobs Canada needs filled. And we must showcase and celebrate great practices in companies who are thriving and succeeding through the diversity advantage.



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What is being lost to businesses reluctant to hire new Canadians is that a new Canadian brings with them their contacts, expertise and life experience from beyond this country's borders, they are adaptable workers and that accent tends to mean that person can speak another language in addition to English. These benefits not only need to be recognized by employers but by all level of governments through policies that further encourage the private sector.

So when you punch in at work remember it is your right because of the Universal Declaration and the human rights we all aspire to. And although this day is meant as a celebration of what we have achieved in the past, it is also a reminder of the improvements that still need to be made for the future of our communities, our country. Unless we have the willingness to work at establishing institutional readiness for new Canadians, these rights will slowly be chipped away, leaving all of us diminished.

Kathryn White
Executive Director
United Nations Association in Canada