

LEADERSHIP IN DEI



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What did you learn from your recent research into the opportunities that benefits plans have to incorporate diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)?

Organizations are spending a lot of time thinking about their DEI policies and making DEI part of their strategy because it's the right thing to do, it creates high engagement and it drives higher performance. Also, clients are demanding progress in DEI and more broadly in ESG [environmental, social, governance] and sustainability.

We thought it was important to gather input from Canadians on these issues, so we partnered with Ipsos to survey more than 2,000 people across the country, ensuring that we included significant representation from Black and Indigenous communities, people of colour, LGBTQ2S+ communities and people with disabilities. We found that Canadians as a whole are very satisfied with their benefits (about 80 per cent), but members of specific communities are less satisfied (in the high 60s and low 70s). Also, Canadians as a whole don't consider having diverse benefits plans a key priority (26 per cent say it's very important), but many members of specific communities think this is more important (40 to 50 per cent). Interestingly, they didn't just answer that it is important that their own group's needs be represented; their answers indicated that it is important that the needs of *all* diverse groups be represented.

When we asked specifically what could be different, we received similar responses across the board. Often, many of those in diverse groups aren't fully utilizing their benefits due to the complexity around using their plans. It seems that part of what's driving this perceived complexity is social accessibility. This includes things such as non-inclusive language and not having access to health practitioners who themselves are diverse or who are allies of diverse groups. What the survey results reinforce is that our industry can make a difference by improving access, including social accessibility.

How can plan sponsors better align their benefits plans to DEI?

Many organizations put benefits plans in place to help employees become healthier, and it's important to start by recognizing that every Canadian has a unique health journey.

There's no question that using the right terminology matters. For example, at Sun Life, we've switched from the term "fertility" to "family building," "substance abuse" to "substance use," and "committing suicide" to "dying by suicide." We also developed a mental health toolkit that includes a training video for managers and a document explaining inclusive and non-inclusive language.

In addition, it's critical to talk to employees through surveys and

focus groups to better understand their needs. Many plans already have components that meet the diverse needs of employees – such as virtual care and extended health-care plans that cover hormone therapy, mobility aids and prosthetics. It's important to remind employees of the breadth of their coverage. Indeed, our research shows that, overall, members of diverse communities tend to place a high value on access to benefits outside of what's traditionally offered in an extended health-care plan.

Why do you advocate for DEI?

I'm a cisgender woman who is part of the LGBTQ2S+ community. If I think about my own experience, I see the value of being represented and being part of a culture where I can be authentic and where the organization values my diversity. I strongly believe that equity access and representation create a much more fertile ground for innovation, performance and retention. Every Canadian should have the opportunity to feel valued and included, and every organization should cultivate an environment in which that happens.