

The reluctance of Canadian businesses to collect race-based data needs to end

PAMELA JEFFERY AND WES HALL
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Pamela Jeffery is founder of The Prosperity Project and Wes Hall is founder of the BlackNorth Initiative.

One of the few bright spots of 2020 is that business leaders have awoken to the power of CEO activism. They have come together to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, while dismantling the pandemic of bias and anti-Black systemic racism.

Out of a commitment to remove the barriers faced by Black Canadians and safeguarding the social and economic health of women, who have disproportionately been affected by the pandemic, The Prosperity Project and the BlackNorth Initiative were born. These initiatives are driven by the goals of equity, prosperity and eliminating racial barriers. This is not only of social importance, but a business imperative.

In Canada, “95 per cent of institutional investors said strong diversity and inclusion metrics have a positive impact on a company’s share price,” according to [research](#) released by PR and marketing consultants Edelman last month.

But where are the metrics?

One of The Prosperity Project’s five initiatives is to collect gender diversity data on the representation of women in leadership roles in Canada’s largest organizations, including intersectional data (women who also identify as BIPOC and/or living with disabilities). Signatories of the BlackNorth Initiative’s CEO Pledge have agreed to collect and report employee data by race also.

Canadians who are Black, Indigenous or female understand the data only too well: They know the stunning lack of diversity in Canada’s executive offices and boardrooms. These data are for those who have not faced discrimination, and for too long have been able to easily and comfortably pretend that the problem doesn’t exist.

Not collecting data is an intrinsic example of how the gatekeepers have set up a system that has allowed anti-Black systemic racism to remain unchecked. The need for better intersectional data is not new, but it is urgent. Systemic racism and discrimination have profoundly affected all areas of our society in many ways. The pandemic has only worsened the challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Not asking for race, gender and ethnicity data while trying to stop bias and systemic racism is like not testing for COVID-19 and tracing contacts while trying to stop the spread of the virus. If we don't look, ask, or measure, we won't know. Not knowing is how those at the top of a racist system want to keep it.

We need data to show our business leaders and elected officials just how much being Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ and/or female hurts your chances of being promoted, the health care you get, or even how many times you are stopped by police.

Time and again, we hear Canadians say that it's nothing like the United States. This false sense of virtue comes from an absence of data. Ignorance can be bliss and change is uncomfortable but needed.

If one thing has proved true since the Prosperity Project and the BlackNorth Initiative were launched: Many business leaders care and want to do better.

Many organizations, including some of the 400 that have signed BlackNorth's CEO Pledge and those participating in The Prosperity Project's first annual gender diversity data-tracking study, are muddling through the difficulties of assessing their work force for the first time. It's not simple, but we are asking companies to invest in this process, to change the way they think and act to start difficult conversations that are both respectful and legal.

We applaud those leading the way by inviting employees to voluntarily self-identify. Thoughtful leaders are using this data to create more inclusive workplaces where employee experience isn't influenced by skin colour by rooting out bias in hiring and promotion decisions.

We believe change starts with the business community. Yet, we have seen many leaders balk at quantifying their organizational makeup with justifications such as "it's too complicated" and "our employees don't like to be identified."

We cannot be squeamish, too polite and principled about collecting race-based data. The collection of data during this pandemic is critical in addressing gender equality and anti-Black racism in Canada. We cannot address what is not measured. We need our leaders to have an honest look at the state of affairs in Canada and reject the notion that everything is okay because, truth be told, it is simply not okay.