



*Guideline 2:  
Communications*



Human Resources  
Development Canada

Développement des  
ressources humaines Canada

Labour Program

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**Canada**

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## INTRODUCTION

This Guideline is intended to clarify the requirements of the *Employment Equity Act* about communicating information to employees regarding employment equity and the employment equity plan. It is also intended to assist organizations and bargaining agents in developing effective communications that contribute to reasonable progress on employment equity.

Communication with respect to employment equity is not only required by law, it is also essential to the success of the employment equity plan. An informed and supportive workforce can help ensure that plan activities are carried out. Good communication will also ensure that those with direct responsibility for carrying out activities receive regular feedback on their effectiveness.

Guideline 3 addresses the related issue of consultation and collaboration with employee representatives. Guideline 1, entitled Getting Started, refers to some of the topics to be communicated to employees particularly in the early stages of developing a program. Reporting requirements for Human Resources Development Canada are covered in Guideline 11.

Guidelines provide general direction and practical examples that reflect best practices. They are not, however, a template: readers should consider the specific circumstances of their own organization as they use the Guidelines. Other documents to consult include the *Act* and *Regulations* as well as documents available from the Canadian Human Rights Commission relating to the audit process.

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## PART A: LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Section 14 of the *Act* states: :

“Every employer shall provide information to its employees explaining the purpose of employment equity and shall keep its employees informed about measures the employer has undertaken or is planning to undertake to implement employment equity and the progress the employer has made in implementing employment equity.”

Communications therefore need to address:

- *Why* employment equity?
- *What* is the organization doing to achieve it?
- *How* is the organization progressing?

Section 15 of the *Act* states that every employer shall consult with its employee representatives by inviting the representatives to provide their views concerning "the assistance that the representatives could provide to the employer to facilitate ... the communication to its employees of matters relating to employment equity..."

See **Guideline 3: Consultation and Collaboration.**

The *Regulations* make no specific reference to internal communication requirements.

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## **PART B: PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

### **The Purpose Of Communicating**

Communication aims to create a climate of understanding, commitment and support that will contribute to the success and effectiveness of the organization's employment equity plan and activities. Effective communication keeps employees informed and promotes ownership and participation in the employment equity program. It reminds employees that the program is ongoing and emphasizes the organization's commitment to employment equity. Good communication about employment equity also should remind employees that a bias free workplace is good for everyone as well as the efficiency of the organization.

Although Section 14 and 15 of the *Act* spell out certain obligations to both provide information to employees and consult with employee representatives about communication, it is important that employers go beyond these minimum requirements. Employers with effective employment equity programs will be communicating with employees at all stages of the development and implementation of the employment equity program. Such ongoing communication will help to ensure that employees understand how employment equity benefits everyone. It will also help to ensure appropriate employee participation in the program.

Employers may wish to develop a strategy to ensure this ongoing communication.

Such a strategy will include a number of components, each intended to achieve specific results. For example, communications about the workforce survey are designed to achieve a high level of accurate response from employees. Communications about the employment equity plan may be intended to increase the expertise of managers with respect to employment equity implementation; to promote the effective implementation of the plan; to remind managers about their ongoing responsibilities; to recognize achievements; and to keep staff informed of progress.

Spelling out specific goals for each communication activity helps to focus the development of communications and enables an evaluation of the success of each activity.

## **Laying the Groundwork**

### ***Responsibility***

Responsibility for carrying out an organization's communication strategy needs to be defined at the outset. Many organizations find that investing lead responsibility in one person (such as the senior executive responsible for employment equity) provides the most consistency and control. Some organizations will find that a sub-committee of the main employment equity committee or a small working group responsible for communications works best for them. This group may include employee representatives along with the person who usually develops organizational communications. Still others may integrate the responsibility with the role of communications staff. In this model, input would still come from the senior executive and/or the employment equity committee. Input from designated group employees is critical to ensure the message will be well received by all designated group employees. All communication should be supported from the highest level.

## ***Consultation***

The law requires the employer to consult employee representatives about how these representatives might help in communicating with employees about employment equity. In many cases, representatives can play an active role in communications.

Representatives may, for instance, participate in presentations to their own members, convey the union's support for the employment equity program, and encourage participation in the workforce survey.

Communications from employee representatives can be one of the most effective ways of informing employees about the organization's employment equity program and ensuring their participation. It is important that these representatives are given the resources necessary to communicate effectively.

These resources may include training on the purposes of employment equity, diversity seminars, and access to communication vehicles such as newsletters and staff meetings.

## ***Other Resources***

Larger organizations may have marketing, advertising or public relations personnel with expertise in communications. These people can serve as resources in developing an organization-wide communication strategy as well as in crafting the individual components of that strategy. Outside assistance may be helpful for specific projects, for example, management seminars.

## ***Communication Strategy***

The individual(s) responsible for communications will need to develop a general communications strategy early on in the employment equity program.



The strategy should address:

- what needs to be communicated;
- with whom to communicate;
- how to communicate; and
- when to communicate.

The strategy should take account of the realities of the organization with respect to employment equity:

- What priority has employment equity had until now?
- Is there resistance to equity? If so, where?
- What are the key concerns among staff? Among managers?
- Are other things happening in the organization that could make change difficult (e.g. downsizing, corporate reorganization, take-overs, selling a portion of the company)?

It is important that the strategy has the flexibility to address unexpected issues as they arise. The findings of the Employment Systems Review and the Workforce Analysis will determine communication needs and issues as the program progresses.

Communications need to be two-ways to prevent problems occurring. Feedback is vitally important in ensuring that communication messages are understood as intended.

Communications should be provided in alternate formats where required (audio, Braille etc.).

## **Structure and Elements**

### ***What needs to be communicated***

The law requires that organizations inform employees about:

- the **purposes** of employment equity;
- the **measures** the employer has undertaken or plans to undertake to implement equity; and
- the **progress** made in implementing employment equity.

### **Purposes**

Informing employees about the purposes of employment equity involves raising awareness and understanding among employees of the:

- forms and effects of discrimination;
- the social and economic costs of discrimination;
- background on the disadvantages experienced by designated groups in the workplace; and
- the need for a proactive program like employment equity to remove barriers and to ensure equal opportunity for all groups.

Other communication tasks here may include:

- explaining the myths about employment equity (claims of reverse discrimination, quotas);
- exploring sensitive issues such as the impact of employment equity in a time of downsizing; and
- outlining the business advantages of employment equity.

## **Measures**

Organizations will need to communicate to employees about the measures taken or planned to implement an employment equity program. These may include:

- the organization's policy on employment equity and what it means for managers and employees generally;
- roles and responsibilities relating to employment equity and where to get more information;
- the workforce survey and the need for all employees to participate;
- the employment systems review process and summary of findings of the review;
- the employment equity plan, goals and timetables, activities and special measures;
- initiatives or policies, for example, revised recruitment policy, outreach recruitment, accommodation policy, flexible work arrangements, improving workplace accessibility, harassment prevention training, etc.

*See **Guideline 4: Collection of Workforce Information***

The communications on each of the above items could include a number of initiatives. See the example on communications to employees about the workforce survey on page 10.

## **Progress**

Information on the progress in implementing equity may include:

- the percentage representation of designated groups in the organization compared to previous years;
- updates on implementation of the plan and the results achieved (quarterly or annual depending on degree of activity);

- revisions to the plan; and
- information on the results of special initiatives such as the development of a management training program for clerical workers.

The extent to which people need to know about these items will determine what communication tools to use. For example, managers who have direct responsibility for implementing the employment equity plan will need regular and detailed updates on the progress of the plan while employees generally will need less detailed information. This may mean for example, that each manager receives monthly detailed reports and employees only receive annual summary reports in a newsletter.

Similarly, a new flexible work arrangement policy will need to be communicated broadly to all employees covered by the policy. Those responsible for administering the policy will need more detailed information. A bridging program aimed at developing Aboriginal employees will require special efforts to inform them about the program and encourage their participation. Other employees need to be aware only of the general nature of the program, but do not need the details.

Organizational realities also must be taken into account in determining what and when to communicate. An organization new to employment equity may need an intensive up-front training of managers on employment equity and its implementation. When myths or misconceptions exist about equity among employees generally, these would need to be discussed in communications early in the program in order to ensure its success.

### **SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY FOR A WORKFORCE SURVEY**

Workforce survey communications could include:

- a letter to all employees signed by the CEO explaining why a workforce survey is required and what it means for each employee;
- posters promoting the survey;
- directives to managers and supervisors to inform their staff about information sessions on the survey;
- information sessions explaining the survey and process, and why everyone should complete the form; defining each of the designated groups identifying resources for more information; and providing opportunity for two-way communications;
- union representatives to explain and promote the survey in union meetings and in the union newsletter;
- a brochure with the survey form that briefly explains the process and which encourages participation;
- a telephone hotline for people with questions about the survey;
- a follow-up letter from the CEO thanking people for participating and identifying the next steps in the employment equity process; and
- a summary of survey results published in the staff newsletter.

***With whom to communicate:***

The type of audience will affect the content and approach to communications. Internal audiences can include one or more of the following:

- all employees ;
- new employees;
- job applicants;
- managers and supervisors;
- employee representatives;
- employees from each of the four designated groups; and
- the board of directors.

The audience affects what is to be communicated, the level of detail, the frequency of communication, the mode of communication and the tone of the message. For example, messages to managers might stress responsibilities while messages to employees generally might focus on encouraging support or participation. Other factors that influence communications are previous knowledge level, literacy, language spoken at work and responsibilities.

## ***How to communicate***

### **Personal communications:**

The type and size of audience will influence the type of media used as will the nature of the message to be communicated. Personal (face-to-face) communications, such as meetings, are often more effective than non-personal communications (e-mail, memos, newsletters etc.) This is true especially where the audience is small and not dispersed, where the literacy level is low or where English or French is not the mother tongue. Personal communications tend to be more effective also when dealing with sensitive or complex issues, and when there is a need to persuade people –for example persuading them to participate in the workforce survey.

Personal communications may be more important in the early stages of the employment equity program to ensure people understand the reasons for employment equity and the roles and responsibilities associated with implementing the program. Organizations may also decide to use personal communications to inform employees about special measures that are important to the organization. Organizations sometimes use personal communications where it is likely that written communications will be ignored (for example, where employment equity has previously been a low priority in the organization).

A major advantage of personal communications is that feedback is immediate. An immediate assessment is possible to determine if the message is understood as intended and the message can be adjusted accordingly. Immediate feedback also enables those presenting the communications to identify sensitive or problem issues for their audiences and develop communications to address these.

**Non-personal communication:**

Non-personal communication may be appropriate for providing progress reports on the implementation of the employment equity program. If employees are working in remote locations across the country, personal communications can be difficult. They also require that the organization have access to people (either internal or external) with expertise in employment equity and with good communication skills.

**Communications from senior officers:**

Whether using personal or non-personal media, important communications should be signed or presented by the CEO and senior officers of the organization. Their involvement helps to demonstrate that the organization takes equity very seriously and is committed to achieving equity goals.

**Integrate employment equity communications:**

Employment equity should be integrated with other organizational communications wherever possible. For example, major employment equity activities and achievements could be reported in the organization's annual report. Employee newsletters or training videos could be used to inform staff of the goals and progress of the employment equity program.

**Blend of communication methods:**

Many organizations will choose a blend of communication methods. Each organization will need to look at what communication methods and approaches work best for it and modify the communication strategy accordingly.



The following lists personal and non-personal communications methods. The list is not exhaustive.

PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS:	NON-PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- one-on-one</li><li>- cascades (through the chain of command)</li><li>- meetings</li><li>- information sessions</li><li>- management briefings</li><li>- lunch time sessions</li><li>- presentations</li><li>- training sessions</li><li>- conference calls</li><li>- annual meetings</li><li>- telephone hotline</li><li>- union meetings</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- e-mail</li><li>- desk drops</li><li>- noticeboards</li><li>- posters</li><li>- videos</li><li>- announcements</li><li>- memos and letters</li><li>- newsletters</li><li>- union correspondence</li><li>- pay cheque inserts</li><li>- manuals</li><li>- pamphlets and brochures</li><li>- organization's annual report</li><li>- employment equity annual report</li><li>- employment equity quarterly reports/newsletter</li><li>- public relations communiqués</li></ul>

***When to communicate:***

Communication is an ongoing process. However there are a number of important points to be aware of in developing a communication strategy. These include:

- the employment equity program set-up, commitment of senior management and assignment of responsibility;
- establishment of an employment equity committee;
- conducting the workforce survey and sharing the results;

- the results of the workforce analysis;
- review of employment policies and practices (the employment systems review);
- development of the employment equity plan;
- implementation of new policies and initiatives;
- progress reports at major milestones in the plan; and
- revision of the plan.

The communication strategy must consider carefully the timing of various communications. For example, general information on the reasons for employment equity and on any misconceptions which may exist should proceed any workforce survey communications.

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## **PART C: INFORMATION DOCUMENTS**

The following examples illustrate some of the items that are typical of the communications plans of small and large organizations. In developing a strategy, it is useful to identify what needs to be communicated; who needs to know; how should it be communicated and by whom; and when should it be communicated.

**Example 1: Boxco: A Small Organization**

Boxco makes packing boxes at a plant in Montreal and has recently become a federal contractor. It has 100 employees, all based in the Montreal plant. Many of the workers are immigrants who are not proficient in either English or French. The workers are not unionized. Until now, employment equity has not been an issue for this organization. The Vice-President of Marketing was appointed as the senior executive responsible for employment equity. Important initiatives are usually communicated at either specially convened staff meetings or personally through the chain of command (managers or supervisors verbally inform their staff.)

**Boxco Communication Plan:**

A communication plan in this organization could include the following elements:

- an all staff meeting to announce the employment equity policy and program; to explain what it means for the organization and for employees; to explain the rationale for such a program; to demonstrate the commitment of senior management; to introduce the senior vice-president responsible; and to inform employees about the establishment of an employment equity committee;
- a letter (followed up by a telephone call) from the Vice-President to the manager or supervisor in each work area looking for a representative for the employment equity committee;
- a seminar provided by an HRDC consultant for the employment equity committee, Vice-President and senior managers. The seminar would provide information on the background to employment equity, the status of the designated groups, and the development and implementation of an employment equity plan;
- an on-going flow of information from the employment equity committee members to staff in the areas they represent;
- briefings from the Vice-President for managers and supervisors on the workforce survey process;
- information sessions provided by managers and supervisors for their staff on the workforce survey and how the results will be used to carry out a workforce analysis. Managers and supervisors explain the process, define “designated groups”, encourage participation in survey and answer employees’ questions;
- one member of the employment equity committee designated as the main information resource for staff during the workforce survey;
- a brochure or letter accompanying the survey form. The brochure and form are translated into the main languages spoken by staff;
- an information session provided by the Vice-President for managers to inform them of the results of the workforce survey and workforce analysis. Managers in turn inform their staff;
- information from the employment equity committee to staff about the employment systems review;

- a management meeting informing managers of the planning process and asking for their input ;
- a summary of the employment systems review and the plan presented at a general staff meeting;
- a management meeting to clarify activities and the results expected of each manager;
- a brochure for new employees on the company's employment equity policy and workforce survey;
- quarterly written updates to managers on the progress of the employment equity implementation plan;
- bi-annual management meetings to review progress, exchange information and ideas;
- updates to staff on progress of plan at bi-annual staff meetings; and
- dissemination of revised human resources manual and overview of main changes at staff meeting.

**Example 2: Wigtco: A Large Organization**

The following example lists some of the communication activities that a larger organization could carry out.

Wigtco is a large company that provides a range of transportation services. The company has experienced significant growth in the last few years and now has about 1,000 employees in five locations across Canada, with the majority at head office in Edmonton. Clerical and administrative staff are represented by one union and drivers and technicians by another. The company has previously carried out some employment equity activities including a workforce survey. However, given the low response rate to the last survey and various changes in the company, management decided to launch a new employment equity program and undertake a new survey. The company relies mainly on e-mail to communicate to managerial, professional, administrative and clerical employees. Most of the drivers and technicians do not have computers and so communications to this group normally entail one-to-one or group meetings with management along with pay cheque inserts.

Previous employment equity efforts uncovered a certain resistance to employment equity among drivers and technicians as well as from some managers, many of whom had been promoted from the driver and technician groups. The company also knew that a few people associated employment equity with hiring unqualified people.

Wigtco Communication Plan:

A communication plan in this type of organization could include the following elements:

- e-mail and pay-cheque inserts from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to all employees reminding them that the organization is committed to fairness and equity, informing them that the employment equity policy has been revised and strengthened, outlining the rationale for the program, introducing the senior executive responsible for the program, and summarizing the next steps in the program;
- staff meetings at which the CEO and the senior executive responsible for employment equity reiterate the objectives and rationale for the program. This function may be delegated in organizations that have offices spread over wide distances;
- day-to-day communication by the employment equity committee to promote the program with co-workers;
- articles in the company newsletter;
- employment equity training by HRDC consultants for the committee and to the managers responsible for developing and implementing the employment equity plan;
- seminars for all staff on the background to employment equity including what it means in practice and the myths about employment equity. These sessions are presented by employment equity committee members, training staff, along with the senior executive when possible. Sessions include ample time for questions and answers and group discussion;
- developing a library which includes materials on employment equity and practical implementation issues. Information disseminated to managers and supervisors;
- briefings by the senior executive for managers on the workforce survey process at routine management meetings at the five work sites;
- a poster and brochure promoting the workforce survey with materials posted at prominent locations at each work site;
- e-mail/pay cheque insert inviting all employees to attend an information session on the survey one at each location and four at head office to accommodate large number of staff there;

- information sessions presented by senior executive and committee representatives in which the survey process is explained; designated group definitions are provided; and participation in the survey is encouraged;
- individuals at each location designated as the main information resource for staff during the survey;
- a telephone hotline established for the week of the survey to answer questions in confidence;
- a brochure or letter accompanying the survey form (brochure/letter and form translated into main languages spoken by staff);
- a summary of survey results published in a newsletter;
- a newsletter article on the employment systems review process;
- newsletter article on results of the employment systems review;
- management meetings at each location to develop an employment equity plan;
- a summary of the employment equity plan published in a newsletter and on the company web site;
- a meeting of managers responsible for implementing the plan, clarification of activities and results expected;
- information for all new employees on the company's employment equity policy;
- monthly written updates to managers on the progress of the plan;
- twice-yearly management meetings to review progress, exchange information and ideas;
- updates to staff on progress of the plan in the organization's newsletters twice each year; and
- a summary of the employment equity plan and progress to date reported in the annual report.



### **Considerations for Effective Communications**

- Communications should be appropriate to the audience in terms of what they need to know and be presented in a way that is understandable to the target audience.
- Communications should be user-friendly, written in simple and clear language and presented in an easy-to-read format with appropriate graphics.
- Communication methods may need to vary to reach all groups, including employees (often designated group members) at the lowest levels of the organization, who may not have access to the usual communication networks.
- Communications must be a part of managers' day-to-day responsibilities. Managers need to promote the employment equity program and to set a positive example in their dealings with designated group members.
- Employment equity communications should be consistent with other messages, including formal communications and actions e.g. managers should be seen to be hiring visible minorities and promoting women into male-dominated jobs where this is part of the employment equity plan.
- Communications must be timely, (e.g. communications throughout the build-up to a workforce survey, during the survey and following the survey).

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## ***Communications***

- Communications must be up-to-date and remind employees that employment equity is an ongoing commitment.
- Communications must meet the information needs of employees new to the organization. The special needs of newly appointed managers and supervisors need to be addressed.
- Senior management should sign important communications to demonstrate their commitment and the importance of the initiative to the organization.
- Communications must be culturally sensitive and inclusive.