BIPOC
Youth Experience:
Young racialized looking for work – What is it like Looking for Work for Young People of Colour?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Looking for a job is an exhausting and deterring task. Youth are taught about the wonders of LinkedIn, Indeed, and other job search engines and made to believe the internet has made the job search easier. When browsing these multi-tiered search engines, however, a common requirement is that applicants must have a certain level of technological competency, high degree of education or training, and the ever present "must have 'x' amount of years' experience" in order to be a suitable candidate. These common hurdles are faced by many young professionals; this report will provide insights showing these hurdles are further amplified for Black, Indigenous and People(s) of Colour (BIPOC) youth to maneuver when attempting to seek employment.

First Work Youth Council members conducted a focus group study to investigate the common employment and workplace trends which are discouraging for young BIPOC individuals, not just within the workplace but while job seeking. Participants of the focus group indicated discomfort handing out resumes (digitally or physically) in an "all-white space," and that those successful candidates in workplaces with a "white" environment resulted in rapid attrition. The study further explored the technological gaps that plague BIPOC communities in Ontario, despite living in a thriving province with an abundance of existing infrastructure and economic stability. Focus group participants also showcased that stigma towards physical appearance remains an issue in today's workplace, further indicating the barriers BIPOC youth face in the working world.

These deterrents need to be addressed on a federal and provincial level, with insights and solutions included from the impacted communities. There are solutions existing to take on a more proactive approach for BIPOC youth success, which the focus group participants echoed in discussion. It is imperative to address deterrents to BIPOC youth success, for not only this generation, but the next generation of BIPOC youth still dreaming of what they want to be when they grow up.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, systemic workplace racism is a trend that Black, Indigenous or People(s) of Colour (BIPOC) citizens have faced for far too long.

The primary research conducted for this report was compiled by implementing a structured focus group of eight youth (under 30) participants from various educational levels, spread out across the province. The participants were recruited through First Work's employment services members and associated sector partners. The focus group participants represented Black, Indigenous and People of Colour communities, however, due to the sample size, their opinions cannot be generalized to the entirety of Ontario's BIPOC youth. It should also be noted that the levels of educational attainment were quite high for these participants, with many having completed post-secondary education. Through a question-and-answer period of the focus group, qualitative data was transcribed to provide a first-person perspective of what BIPOC youth routinely encounter. All the participants were actively seeking employment at some point during or prior to the impacts of COVID-19.

Every participant in the focus group displayed a different level of bias and/or racialized patterns while seeking employment, and while in a working environment.

This report is centered around the focus group study that was supervised by two neutral unbiased coordinators, therefore the insights cannot be generalized across the entire Ontario BIPOC youth population; however, the data collected is relevant to the unique experiences of marginalized youth. Participants were quiet to start, however the disconnect of online calls made it easier for the participants to speak more freely, as there's a lessened feeling of consequence, and a greater sense of anonymity – even with cameras on. It is important to note that many of the focus group participants either had not experienced direct discrimination in the workplace or had not had their first job yet. If discrimination was experienced, it was not systemic, but individualistic, naturally shifting the discussion. Instead, participants tackled the issue of the pre-hiring process which sparked an insightful conversation. This report will investigate the major themes of concern discussed by the focus group participants, closing with recommendations on how to address the issues identified and how to best implement those strategies.

It is imperative to apply an intersectional lens to ensure BIPOC youth are appropriately supported in their employment endeavours; however, it must be noted that BIPOC youth are not a monolith. BIPOC youth experience a plethora of different experiences, strengths and barriers, the nuances of which must be acknowledged in the discourse on race.

OBJECTIVE

This focus group study was conducted to gain a better understanding from BIPOC youth themselves on what it is like looking for work as a young person in an effort to provide solutions for improving BIPOC employment. The objective of this report is to bring more awareness to some of the more intensified social barriers that BIPOC youth maneuver when seeking meaningful employment. Both nationally and provincially, there is still a long road ahead for a strategic plan of action, that will hopefully one day eradicate a racialized labour market.

Studies have shown that having a diverse team of people, results in a mentally-well work climate (Hilton, 2021).

With diverse teams shown to improve workplaces, there is an employer consideration to removing racism from the workforce. It is good business practice to bring diversity and inclusion more strongly into the workplace and this report will address some recommendations to improve the work experience for BIPOC youth. The world is an evolving place; businesses must continue to acclimatize to diverse labour pools to adapt to changing economies.

INSIGHTS & FINDINGS

Some of the discoveries made during this focus group were the **ongoing technological gap, lack of experience required for employability, and the traditional physical appearance issues.** Even prior to the global impact of COVID-19, marginalized/vulnerable youth have struggled with the technological barriers in their everyday routines, let alone within the workforce. Inability to afford the sufficient laptops, tablets, or other handheld devices cause a social divide, add in the inability to afford internet and you have an individual that has very limited means of researching a potential job position, let alone be hired to perform an entry level position in the labour market. **When youth do have adequate devices and internet connection, the next barrier is one of the oldest and outdated resume requirements; must have 'x' years of experience.**

Another area of interest is the **strained living environment many BIPOC youth experience in comparison to non-BIPOC youth.** The dexterity of balancing a healthy home life, paired with financial sustainability and education is an extremely difficult act for any young person to be burdened with. **It is common for BIPOC youth to reside with two or more generations or peers in a household, in order to maintain a basic living standard, which can be linked to the provincial housing crisis.** For some, intergenerational households are culturally reflective and nourishing environments which are chosen voluntarily. However, the impacts of Ontario's housing crisis and lack of living affordability can force youth into strained multi-generational households, which can impede one's ability to balance a level of mental, physical and emotional readiness required for seeking employment. The shift to virtual/remote work has exacerbated the housing issue in relation to employment, and further exploration into the matter needs to be addressed in all municipalities.

TECHNOLOGY GAP

Many of the youth noted they felt unprepared for work and have felt this way for years. One of the biggest hurdles is a technology gap in both access and familiarity. In regard to applying for jobs, a participant stated, **"I don't feel comfortable applying...because I don't feel like I have the [skills required]."** Most youth operate on their phones as their main device, and with the way technology has evolved, can complete their education strictly with physical notebooks and their phones for essays and projects. But in the workplace, this is both not accepted and not a viable option, as certain office software is computer-exclusive or has computer-exclusive features, putting mobile-centric youth at a great disadvantage.

Focus group participants shared that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, technological literacy in schools were weak, using and teaching software that is not always used in the workplace (for example, Chromebooks and G-Suite). Participants questioned how they would reach the "new employability standard" without training provided.

But with the pandemic, a new problem of technology access arises. Youth who relied on Chromebook rentals no longer necessarily have that option (depending on the school's rules). **"Not everyone has an encrypted, secure laptop,...a high-quality webcam [or] mic, [...or] the software to protect their devices,"** which are needed to navigate the professional virtual world. Additionally, some households do not have reliable internet access, or don't have internet access at all. **"Some people [still] do not have stable internet. [In schools] many students relied on the rented technology for assignments".**

EXPERIENCE GAP

The next issue, which is a more longstanding issue, was the previous work experience gap. The youth expressed concern that there were minimal opportunities for them to get actual job experience while still being able to maintain the necessary GPA to attend a good post-secondary school. Even with post-secondary education, this problem persisted. For families with generational wealth and established professional networks, this problem can be a non-issue as their children can focus on school and enjoy extra curriculars. For racialized youth without generational wealth, experience and grades are their only determinant for employment success. The issue is that most entry level positions require job experience, and the only positions that do not require experience are the dedicated "student positions", of which there are few overall. **"You need a master's degree, and 3 years of work and research experience. Some jobs, especially the Government of Canada, didn't count your undergraduate research [or any] research [from your time in] school".** Youth are finding it extremely difficult to manage their grades while attaining meaningful and sufficient experience to become qualified for the jobs they have pursued education to attain.

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PHYSICAL APPEARANCE STIGMA

Physical appearance in the workplace is not a new stigma. Professional attire for women and men in the workplace is evolving; within the last decade, society has begun to witness public acceptance of a more casual approach to workplace fashions, a prime example is the unspoken consent for comfortable footwear in office spaces. Society is starting to loosen its hold on dictating what male, female, or non-binary individuals choose to pull from their closets, or how they wear their hair, or if they choose to wear makeup. Unfortunately, this is not the same standard of respect given to BIPOC individuals, and there is still a long way to go to take down physical taboo barriers for BIPOC individuals.

As it stands, **women have a systemic pressure to fit within a male standard of business attire, which can often be relative to a reporting superior.** The focus group stated they felt intense pressure to wear makeup and do their hair in an expected social norm, so much so that they felt their jobs were on the line if they did not comply.

"It was never [explicitly] stated, but kind of implied...that you should wear makeup and should be dressed up, [even in school spaces]." "When [you wouldn't] wear makeup...you'd get comments like 'why do you look so tired.'"

As seen with these statements, an internalized archetype from years of systemic discrimination in workplaces from male superiors who held their power over women. For women of colour, this pressure was heightened, as some participants felt it was necessary to make their appearance fit what they believed their white-dominated workplace deemed appropriate.

Again, even when not explicitly told to, this was an internalized feeling the youth experienced, conditioned from years of media and societal influence. The employer further exacerbated this incident through their disconnect and lack of attempt to create a safe and welcoming environment for racialized workers. In one case, a member of the focus group reported, "I accepted a position [at an all-white office] because I was desperate. I was absolutely miserable [and] quit three months later." The member also said that the workplace had no retention of BIPOC employees.

APPEARANCE STIGMA - ATTIRE

Through pop culture imagery, society has a perceived notion that **business casual attire (for certain roles) come across as "smart," creating an illusion that a well-dressed young professional must be the most qualified candidate for the job.** The young BIPOC individuals in this focus group outlined their inability to afford a certain style of attire. In one circumstance, this resulted in one participant having to wear the same outfit to all their interviews. Another focus group participant described a circumstance in which they held a position within a lab setting, which adhered to a strict dress code for the functionality and safety measures. In this setting, employees were prescribed to wear a traditional white lab coat, comfortable shoes, and black pants. Some of the employees chose to wear less business-professional styled pants; specifically, a group of female colleagues chose black Lululemon yoga pants. **The participant and a fellow BIPOC youth worker subsequently chose black Nike brand pants – matching their appropriate dress code guidelines – only to be met with a verbal warning from their superior for wearing "unsuitable" attire in the workplace. Nothing was said to the non-BIPOC Lululemon wearing coworkers.** It is worth noting that this occurred in front of peers, making the event even more uncomfortable. When questioning their superior as to why they were singled out, both the participant and their BIPOC colleague received no comment on the matter.

Another hurdle briefly mentioned by participants was the **cost of and access to professional clothing.** Business casual attire can be found for affordable prices, but it will look cheap and ill fitting, adding to the previously established anxiety from lack of preparation and experience. This gap enhances the appearance stigma for many youth, as they feel they must dress for the job they want, even if they have not been able to afford to dress this way before.
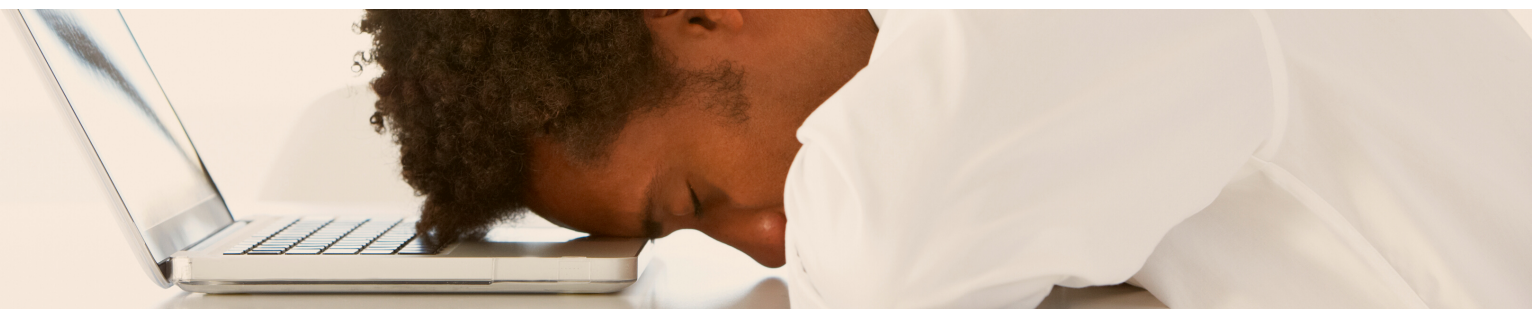
APPEARANCE STIGMA - HAIR

Stigma surrounding **BIPOC youth's hair** was another topic brought out in this focus group. The focus group stated that on occasion employers claimed that their hair was "unkempt" despite displaying the same style choice as that of a non-BIPOC person. One participant stated that their employer was so uncomfortable addressing their hair in the workplace, he opted to take a fellow BIPOC worker aside, instructing them to discuss BIPOC hair with their coworkers. **The participant said:**

"It felt as if he was 'passing the buck' – he didn't have the courage to just talk to me as a human. He made the other Black coworkers tell me, instead of just saying something to me."

This left the BIPOC youth feeling upset about their hair texture for years after this encounter. This showcases two obstacles; firstly, **an employer's unwillingness to educate themselves on different cultures' hair styling.** Secondly, **an employer's weak approach to diversity and inclusion in the workplace, even at leadership level.** Adequate training around emotional intelligence, empathy and cultural acceptance would be a great asset to any company displaying this level racial work environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

Anne E. Lopez, professor of educational leadership and policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto states,

"Racism is systemic. Injustices are systemic. So you cannot change something that's systemic and structural with Band-Aids – and that's what we've been doing" (Wong, 2021).

The focus group participants agreed that systemic racism in the labour market is deeply embedded and conducting "one off" training workshops are not going to fix the problem overnight.

Many companies, when faced with an internal racist dilemma, have their Human Resource team scream, "More anti-racism training and workshops!"

Generally, one of two things happen when an employee reads on their work email that more training is coming their way; either an exasperated groan of misery, or excitement for the 'get out of work' for the day. Cognitive changes - meaning an individual mindset shift - need to be supported from a company in order to finally have a cohesive outcome. Taking down racial patterns in the labour market is major policy make-over, but thankfully there are tools and resources available for companies to tap into.

Workshops or seminars that are owned and orchestrated by BIPOC facilitators is just one approach. Hiring BIPOC consultant firms when making policy changes is another strategy to help a business tear down entry barriers for BIPOC people.

The focus groups' concern regarding the lack of consistent definition in what constitutes as 'business wear' is another area which should be explored further. Participants felt this can easily be resolved in schools if classes that are meant to prepare you for job searching took the time to integrate clothing and its importance into the curriculum. This can simply be a list of do's and don'ts that can remedy a large amount of confusion. These classes, or organized information sessions, could talk about many different alternative options, to keep comfortable while remaining work-appropriate.

FUNDING AND FRAMEWORK FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION TRAINING IN WORKPLACES

The Federal government should develop a funding strategy and equitable framework for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) training so employers can spearhead workplaces changes needed in order to bring a BIPOC lens to traditionally white-dominated workplaces.

Discrimination on physical appearance is a difficult issue to solve. On one hand, there are the internalized beliefs created by generations of discrimination, leading to the lack of confidence in many youth (especially racialized youth) to be comfortable in their own skin. On the other hand, there is the decentralized, non-uniform, and inconsistent description of "business attire" that makes it difficult for all youth to participate in appropriate workplace attire. Schools and government programs should be designed to address cost barriers and offer stipends to help equip youth with the tools they need to get started and be comfortable as they enter the workforce.

An example from the focus group highlighted a company which had a track record of not retaining BIPOC employees, and the youth themselves felt miserable at the company. It is not unreasonable to assume then that the workplace being a monoculturally dominated environment is involuntarily exclusionary by not providing a welcoming space for new employees.

As it stands, new employees already suffer from imposter syndrome and the switch to remote work has exacerbated this issue, by removing the opportunity for informal conversation. In the best-case scenario, the company was not intentionally being discriminatory, but rather acted in a business-as-usual type of behaviour, which inadvertently became exclusionary. These types of slip ups are often overlooked in many DEI training courses, as existing courses face a core flaw in focusing on being non-discriminatory, rather than creating a safe and welcoming environment that will grow and evolve alongside its people.

Additionally, there is a duty of care employers must take into consideration when removing racism in the workforce for young professionals and tradespeople that are diving into the labour pool. It is good business practice to bring diversity and inclusion more strongly into the workplace. Workplaces must be welcoming for BIPOC youth to perform their best, requiring DEI training for organizations in order for BIPOC youth to excel in their careers.

CREATING TIMELY, HANDS-ON OPPORTUNITIES FOR BIPOC STUDENTS

Schools need to reinforce the importance of experiential work and offer more fruitful volunteer opportunities for youth to not only provide a foundation of work experience the youth can build from but to also help develop leadership skills for self-advocacy. Volunteering and internships are examples where temporary positions can extend into long term commitments and even potential meaningful careers. Also, schools should offer more options for co-op courses and home economics type courses. Currently, these courses are offered, but with a stigma and ridicule behind them that these are not for "university bound" students, and that you are "dumb" for taking them. This is further stressed when most university programs require course credits that take up the entirety of a student's schedule, leaving no room for co-op, technology/home economics, or other opportunities. This problem also extends into university, where it is claimed that they have bigger networks that expand nationally, and sometimes internationally, meaning, in theory, it should be no issue for universities to create volunteer and job opportunities for students. The main failure is that universities expect students to find time for these opportunities on top of a full course load, which can burden BIPOC youth with less established networks more than their counterparts. Instead, elective courses should include a co-op or capstone course that allows third year students and beyond to start gaining practical experience in their fields of interest.

INCREASE DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY AND LITERACY TRAINING

Digital literacy training needs to be redeveloped to focus more on the core understanding of software and the transferrable skills between applications in order to effectively prepare themselves for adaptability for the ever-changing workforce. Rather than just how to use the necessary equipment to get through school, youth need to gain more confidence in their ability to adapt and learn as new challenges arise, and currently they feel wholly unequipped to do so. Additionally, there needs to be a type of technology stipend for youth who cannot afford their own laptops and internet. It is understood that some schools supply rentable laptops, but after school the youth no longer have access to these computers. Moreover, access to the laptop doesn't solve the internet issue. Though the internet access problem can be solved with public libraries, malls, and other areas where free Wi-Fi is offered, this is not a permanent or reliable solution, as seen especially with lockdown. The internet issue is a much greater hurdle than a one-time technology stipend and needs further research to determine the best long-tern practical solution for it, as internet access is slowly becoming a basic need of modern society.

ANTI-RACISM TRAINING FOR PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES & YOUTH-FACING EMPLOYERS

Anti-racism training should be mandated in the public sector to ensure BIPOC youth are being supported in their education, building a strong foundation of self-worth to take into the workforce. A CBC explorative article released this year showcased the elective approach some employers face when it comes to diversity and inclusion training in the workplace. Specifically with the teacher's union, the general sentiment amongst most individuals is that the workshop and training is a 'voluntary' approach, versus a meaningful, necessary exercise which enables structural change to the overall integrity of the workplace environment. This comes down to effective DEI training at the upper management levels to ensure an anti-discriminatory workplace is fostered by all employees.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, further research must be invoked for explorative research purpose. Youth have showcased their willingness to take down their shy demeanours to offer insightful resources for the future wellbeing of BIPOC youth in the provincial labour market. Youth voices are a good way for industry leaders to start a strategic plan to implement better workplace equality, BIPOC youth have been raised with a community of knowledge and insight that can only further the longevity of small, medium and even large entities. The further research is essential for on a larger scale, the hopeful results can transform policies and create change from the highest level, stemming towards elementary school curriculum changes, setting roots for societal change.

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ABOUT FIRST WORK

First Work is Ontario's employment network: a leading membership organization bringing together the best providers of employment programming and services, business leaders, academia, and government to develop and advance evidence-led solutions for employment. Our membership community positions us at the bridge between job seekers and employment, bringing innovative partnerships with industry partners to the workforce development space. Our direct engagement with job seekers, youth and employment services providers ensures our services are relevant, timely and apply an intersectional lens. Our continued advocacy at all levels of government supports progressive policy development for the benefit of all job seekers.

ABOUT FIRST WORK'S YOUTH COUNCIL

First Work's Youth Council is comprised of a diverse group of young people (under 30) from across Ontario. This council convenes bi-monthly to ensure First Work's dedication and work for young jobseekers is reflective of their wants and needs. This cohort has supported the development of First Work's first ever full-day Youth Summit, which took place at Futures: National Workforce Development Conference in 2020. This cohort has also supported the development and design of career exploration events through First Work's youth-voice, Aspire.

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