Best Practices for Architectural Firms: Summary of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Roundtable

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1. Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the Ontario Association of Architects' (OAA) Roundtable on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), held virtually on September 12, 2023, and identify best practices to advance EDI in the architectural industry.

The roundtable included eight professionals from the industry and aimed to foster discussion among architectural practices regarding challenges and initiatives in the architectural profession surrounding EDI. This event was a continuation of roundtable sessions held in the Fall/Winter of 2020 that resulted in a [Summary Report and Recommendations](#).

The insights and reflections provided in this report are based on the contributions of roundtable participants as well as leading and best practice recommendations for advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace. Through a facilitated discussion, participants focused on several areas that can support EDI in the industry, specifically:

- Attracting equity-deserving talent through:
    - **setting the tone early** that organizations are working to advance EDI;
    - **de-biasing hiring decisions** to support fair and equitable outcomes; and
    - **removing barriers** for equity-deserving talent.

- Retaining equity-deserving talent by:
    - **creating inclusive working environments** that consider the needs of individuals across different identity groups;
    - **providing ongoing development opportunities** for equity-deserving talent to grow; and
    - **establishing transparent and open communication** across all levels of the organization.

- Promoting equity-deserving talent by:
    - **establishing clear and consistent performance assessments.**

- Understanding the diverse composition of organizations by:
    - **capturing the diverse representation** of workforces and identifying potential gaps.

- Promoting EDI knowledge and skills by:
    - **growing and advancing diversity, inclusion, and equity knowledge and skills** within practices.

- Ensuring pay equity by:
    - **creating safe opportunities** for employees to raise potential concerns with compensation; and
    - **implementing mechanisms** to identify compensation inequities.

- Supporting EDI advancement in the industry through:
    - **establishing organizational values** that centre equity, diversity, and inclusion; and
    - **the respectful and fair treatment of Intern Architects.**

The details of the conversations that supported these themes are contained within this document. It also concludes with a matrix of best practices and strategies for firms to consider in the advancement of equity, diversity, and inclusion in the architectural profession.

Note: This document is a resources tool and does not constitute legal advice or an interpretation of the law. Best Practice recommendations are those of the participants and/or the consultant engaged.

2. Background

2.1 Context

The OAA's five-year Strategic Plan [includes a commitment to address two very important environmental and social governance themes: Climate Action and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](). These themes act as lenses through which the OAA's work is viewed in order to ensure it positively aligns with the principles.

On July 22, 2020, the OAA first issued an invitation to members to participate in a roundtable discussion on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). Two roundtables were held in the Fall and Winter of 2020 and resulted in a [Summary Report]() that included 40 recommendations being made to advance EDI. In the summer of 2023, OAA sought a consultant to support an additional roundtable discussion to identify the work being done to advance EDI within the industry by architectural firms. Eight individuals, representing eight architectural firms from across the province, participated in the two-hour discussion. Their insights, along with EDI leading and best practices, form the basis of this summary report.

2.2 Importance of EDI

EDI is an important area of focus in making the architectural profession the best it can be. Gaining insight on the experiences of others helps us understand where more attention and resources can be committed to ensure everyone feels valued and is treated with the utmost respect and fairness.

There is also overwhelming evidence of the positive benefits of EDI, including:
- Enhanced team performance, including better problem solving;
- Stronger innovation;
- Higher trust and engagement; and
- Better investment financial performance.

The OAA's commitment to advance EDI in the profession is ongoing and will continue within the Association's regulatory mandate and framework. The ongoing gathering of insight through roundtable discussions signals the importance of EDI to the OAA and the profession at large.

3. Discussion Feedback

3.1 Discussion Themes

The following themes emerged as key areas in advancing EDI in architectural practices.

3.2.1 Attracting Equity-Deserving Talent

Participants shared that efforts have been put in place within their firms to attract equity-deserving talent by creating a welcoming environment for potential candidates, eliminating bias in hiring decisions, and removing barriers that may impede candidates from applying. Further, it was discussed that internationally trained talent face challenges when coming to work in Canada. It is noted that the OAA and Canadian Architectural Certification Board (CACB) provide detailed guidance on the licensure process to become an architect in Ontario, with specific resources available to internationally trained resources.

> "There are barriers that are hidden that you don't actually see; people **might not feel invited** to even apply to the firm."

Efforts to attract candidates from equity-deserving groups were reported being made starting with changes to how firms are presenting themselves to potential candidates in job postings. Examples such as including more visible diversity on websites, using gender-inclusive language in job descriptions and clearly articulating organizational values centred on EDI were discussed.

Participants felt that:

> "A lot of it has to do with the immediate **language that you put forward**."

For example, participants suggested that using pronouns when introducing yourself to candidates is helpful in establishing a safe and inclusive environment.

Other ways of establishing a welcoming environment were shared, including creating a culturally safe space that resonates with equity-deserving talent. As one participant described,

> "We sat down with our partners and, over the course of a few sessions, the team came up with our organizational values and it was all about how we approach our team and work together. Then we had a local Anisininew Nation artist translate that into a painting and attached that to our job offerings. We have had a lot of success. [We have] seen more diverse applicants, the **personal attributes they can connect with**."

Other suggestions included incorporating statements specifically inviting people from equity-deserving groups to apply for job opportunities. In order to support compliance with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA), it is important to offer accommodation in the hiring process for those who request it. Participants also pointed out the importance of providing compensation information on job opportunities. It is noted that compensation can be determined using a pay equity approach in which pay classes are determined by skill, effort, and responsibilities. The *Pay Equity Act* is a legal requirement that covers all employers in Ontario, except for private-sector employers with fewer than 10 employees.

> "The OAA **requires job compensation** to be transparent on the OAA Classifieds."

De-bias Hiring Decisions

> "It's really hard to check your own bias; **we all have biases** from our own experiences."

Putting effort toward de-biasing hiring practices, processes, and decisions was identified as an important tool in supporting the attraction and successful hiring of equity-deserving talent.

Participants identified strategies such as using a hiring panel that includes diverse talent and perspectives, and ensuring identification of candidates for job offers is not done in a vacuum by any one individual. For example, we heard:

> "When we get a collection of resumes, we **ask a handful of people** to look at resumes."

And others noted that:

"**It's hard to remove bias** because you can see on the resume where the person went to school, level of education or country they came from. [We] try to get people for interviews by phone or via Zoom and get to know them more. Take names off resumes when evaluating candidates. **Use a panel to make hiring decisions** and check your biases."

Remove Barriers for Equity-Deserving Talent

Participants discussed approaches to specifically seek out qualified individuals from equity-deserving groups that included using job boards that specifically target those individuals while still assessing skills, experience, and competence.

As one participant stated:

"Find people that have the personal attributes to gain the knowledge and qualifications they need. Being able to put someone in front of a situation and **know that they have the capacity to find the answers** and an openness to communication [is important]."

3.2.2 Retaining Equity-Deserving Talent

Create an Inclusive Working Environment

While attracting equity-deserving talent is important, retaining those individuals once they become a part of an organization is equally important. Participants described efforts that were made to ensure that individuals from equity-deserving groups felt welcomed in their workplaces and felt valued for their contributions.

For example, participants emphasized the importance of going above the minimum requirements of the [Employment Standards Act (ESA)](#) requirements by offering fair and equitable compensation and desirable working conditions.

As one participant described:

"We ensure a maximum of a 37.5-hour work week, pay a living wage for interns and entry-level staff, pay for overtime, etc."

[Many participants also highlighted the inequitable conditions that Intern Architects face, often working long hours and receiving little to no pay.](#) This often disproportionately affects individuals from equity-deserving groups that have historically been underrepresented in the profession.

Participants highlighted the importance of designing and maintaining inclusive spaces that are continually shaped by a variety of diverse voices and perspectives.

One participant shared an example that demonstrated the importance of ongoing feedback and openness to change in creating a welcoming environment.

"For example, not only having gender-neutral washrooms in workspaces, but **listening to feedback** that led to mirrors being put in individual stalls to allow individuals to adjust face coverings [hijabs] in privacy."

Participants also discussed the importance of flexible working conditions and supporting accommodation needs. For example, one participant noted the approach of:

> "Rather than being inflexible [regarding work hours], [I ask staff] tell me what your expectations are and we'll work together to try and meet it. [Take the approach of] **let's figure out a way to make that work**."

Provide Ongoing Development Opportunities

> "One thing I try to do is **provide as much mentorship as possible**. I might invite new interns to client meetings; sometimes you don't get that opportunity until you're years in."

Participants discussed the importance of providing ongoing and meaningful development opportunities to equity-deserving talent. This included providing annual continuing education funds, establishing mentorship and/or sponsorship programs, and creating reward and recognition programs that can elevate equity-deserving talent within an organization.

Additionally, participants noted that it wasn't just about the presence of these things but the quality of them:

> "[We] think about the quality of these experiences…**what kind of experience are those individuals having**? For example, performance reviews, transparency of pay scales, [and] there's also quality of opportunities. What is the actual quality of that experience that they are having? [Not just] are they having the opportunity to participate in training opportunities."

Participants noted the often-problematic hierarchies that are found within the industry lead Intern Architects and junior staff to difficult and less meaningful work experiences.

Suggestions to overcome this issue included enabling junior staff to lead small projects.

As one participant noted:

> "We have a **deliberate practice of having everyone as a project leader** [including giving them the title]. Where students come to us, we try to find a small project that they can lead. We have one large room—no offices. We don't hand the project from person to person. We want people to experience all the joys of being on the jobsite and experience working with the contractor to explain design intent and learn about constructability. There's real reward in everyone on the team witnessing designs and lines on paper translate to a constructed building."

Establish Transparent and Open Communication

> "**Different people have different drivers**, it really depends on what's motivating to people. Some people are very motivated by salary, some by flexibility, some by highest-profile design projects. People come to work with very different motivations. Having that openness to the conversation is important."

In retaining equity-deserving talent, participants discussed establishing transparent and open communication to understand the desires of their employees. Other areas of concern often focused on compensation. As one person noted:

> "**One of the things we struggle with in retaining our talent is compensation**—how people are compensated with the talents they bring forward everyday. People don't raise this issue, they just leave and have a new job lined up."

Many participants identified the struggle of retaining talent due to compensation concerns. Furthermore, they described the inequities that can be created when compensation is not transparently and openly discussed.

As one participant described:

> "**Some people won't ask for a raise**."

Solutions to overcome this concern included providing transparent pay scales and safe avenues for staff to raise concerns.

> "I once worked in an office where they handed out the pay scales, rubric, based on years of experience, etc. **There was no question around what I was being paid**."

Participants felt however that more could be done. As one noted:

> "Having transparency within the firm is a wonderful thing; **there needs to be more [compensation] transparency for Ontario**."

Lastly, participants discussed transparently sharing their business finances with employees to strengthen trust:

> "One of the things I don't have any trouble sharing with my staff is finances; to **let people understand what the economics are behind the business**."

3.2.3 Promoting Equity-Deserving Talent

Establish Clear and Consistent Performance Assessments

Following the conversation, some participants further reflected on the questions and identified the importance of implementing fair performance assessment tools to ensure the fair promotion of equity-deserving talent, as supported by leading and best practice research.

3.2.4 Diverse Composition of Your Organization

Capture Diverse Representation

In order to support EDI initiatives in firms, some participants also further reflected on the importance of understanding the diverse composition of their workforce. This would include capturing the diverse identities of their people through self-identification initiatives and considering benchmarks to identify gaps and strengths.

As one participant noted:

> "Making sure that the stakeholders that we deal with [are satisfied]. **Do we show diversity in a way that appeals to them**?"

3.2.5 EDI Knowledge and Skills

Grow and Advance EDI Knowledge and Skills

Participants identified the importance of maintaining a growth mindset toward EDI and participating in learning opportunities whenever possible. This could include participating in formal training events or learning from their local communities and peers.

As one person challenged:

> "I think as professionals **we should be stepping out into our communities** and beyond our profession."

Others noted the ways in which they worked to celebrate diversity in their firms such as through social events.

One participant described:

> "One of the ways that we've brought our team together is international potlucks; **people come feeling proud** with what they've contributed, it's been a fun event to get to know people at the table."

One participant cautioned to ensure that social events truly are inclusive and considerate of individuals needs. They noted:

> "We had a [person] not attend an event [for religious reasons] because alcohol was served. It was a lesson learned for us in **making sure everyone feels included** and has a sense of belonging."

Lastly, participants discussed the opportunities that working with clients present to them:

> "When we work, we get to learn about different professions. A lot of that helps us to learn how other organizations work within this EDI space—we learn a lot from our clients. I always think that **the clients that we work with provide us an opportunity to see a new perspective."**

3.2.6 Pay Equity

Create Safe Opportunities to Raise Concerns

> "I am aware of firms where sharing your compensation with a co-worker is a **cause for termination.**"

Participants discussed the problematic practice of keeping compensation private. They described methods to ensure that pay is equitable among their employees and that there are open channels of communication for discussing concerns.

One participant stated:

> "I've **implemented a pay equity approach**, looking at skills, effort, and responsibilities. If it's an equivalent job where people have equivalent skill, effort, and responsibility, [they should be paid equally]."

Another described using frequent pulse surveys to check in on their employee's experience in their organizations. They noted:

> "We meet every six months and do a **pulse survey**. [We ask], do you feel like you are acknowledged (compensated) for what you bring to the team? The next question is if you don't feel that you are acknowledged appropriately. We ask for comments, and then we meet with people, [and have] informal 30-minute conversations. It provides an additional opportunity for compensation conversation outside of the formal annual review."

Strategies such as this were felt to alleviate communication breakdowns and concerns regarding compensation as well as general working conditions.

Implement Mechanisms to Identify Compensation Inequities

Following the conversation, some participants identified the need for formal processes to review compensation and fairness such as pay equity audits. They noted that this practice needs to consider fairness across all identity groups, not just gender which is more commonly considered.

3.2.7 Supporting EDI Advancement in the Industry

Establish Organizational Values

Participants described how important it is to advance EDI throughout the industry, beyond their individual firms. Creating statements that demonstrate an overarching commitment to EDI and embedding these concepts into their values and ways of working were identified as important strategies.

As one participant noted:

> "[We need to] **establish EDI as a leadership priority**, not just an HR issue."

Some participants also discussed the importance of EDI being embedded in their work and the reality of the impact this can have. As described by one participant:

> "[EDI is not] at all an HR challenge; it's a business challenge."

It's important to understand the stakeholders of an organization. For example, more than 85% of buying decisions are influenced by women.

Advocate for Equitable Procurement Processes and Procedures

One participant identified the often problematic and unfair conditions in which their work is evaluated and a desire to address immoral and illegal contract provisions. They described the lack of procurement process, procedures, and policies that often lead to work being granted to firms that are not prioritizing EDI.

As one participant described:

"It's frustrating to lose an RFP to firms that are **not subject to the same values around fairness** and then get awards for the sweat equity of working off the backs of our next generation. We need to challenge this [as a profession}."

Respectful and Fair Treatment of Interns

Participants noted throughout the conversation the concerns they had with the lack of respectful and fair treatment of Intern Architects and students. The areas for improvement discussed throughout the conversation were often exaggerated for these employees and the participants noted that the strategies and actions to support EDI identified throughout the discussion should apply to all employees and professionals in the industry, including students and Intern Architects.

4. Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Best Practices

The following recommendations and actions are based on the discussion generated from the roundtable of industry professionals as well as best practices identified by a third party consultant to support strengthening EDI in the workplace.

Area of Focus	Recommendation	Suggested Actions	Identified by	
			Roundtable	Best Practice
Attract Equity-Deserving Talent	1. **Set the tone** early that your organization is working to advance EDI	● Include visible diversity in the promotion of your organization (e.g. feature diverse employee profiles on your website)	✔	✔
		● Encourage staff to share pronouns when communicating, especially with new or potential candidates	✔	✔
		● Clearly articulate organizational values centred on advancing EDI on websites	✔	✔
		● Use gender-inclusive language on job postings and communications	✔	✔
		● Communicate compensation information transparently (i.e. on job postings)	✔	✔
		● Include a statement on job postings that specifically invites people from equity-deserving groups to apply	✔	✔
	2. **De-bias hiring decisions** to support fair and equitable outcomes	● Use a hiring panel that includes diverse talent and perspectives	✔	✔

Area of Focus	Recommendation	Suggested Actions	Identified by	
			Roundtable	Best Practice
		● Ensure the hiring panel reads a Fairness Statement (or Anti-Discrimination Policy) prior to the interviewing of candidates that articulates a commitment to fair hiring decisions		✓
		● Use consistent interview questions and scoring grids for interviews		✓
	3. **Remove barriers for equity-deserving talent**	● Utilize job boards designed to specifically target equity-deserving talent	✓	✓
		● Assess candidates on skills, competence, and qualifications. Where qualifications are not yet in place, explore ways to support the candidate in achieving them.	✓	✓
		● Ask candidates ways that they can be supported in their full and inclusive participation throughout the job application and interview process (e.g. invite people with disabilities to request accommodations)	✓	✓
Retain Equity-Deserving Talent	4. **Create an inclusive working environment** that considers the needs of individuals across different identity groups	● Do more than the minimum requirements set out by *Employment Standards Acts* (ESAs) (e.g. establish a 37.5-hour work week)	✓	✓
		● Create inclusive workspaces that are accessible for all (e.g. ramps to enter buildings, closed captioning for virtual meetings, etc.)	✓	✓

Area of Focus	Recommendation	Suggested Actions	Identified by	
			Roundtable	Best Practice
		● Improve workplace flexibility options that support accommodation needs (e.g. work from home options, flexible hours, etc.)	✔	✔
		● Use equal job titles to the extent possible (e.g. using the term 'Project Leader')	✔	✔
	5. **Provide ongoing development opportunities** for equity-deserving talent to grow	● Establish mentorship programs within a firm	✔	✔
		● Establish sponsorship programs within a firm	✔	✔
		● Provide annual continuing education funds	✔	✔
		● Enable junior staff to lead small projects	✔	
	6. **Establish transparent and open communication** across all levels of the organization	● Include diverse perspectives in decision-making	✔	✔
		● Provide safe avenues for staff to raise concerns	✔	✔
		● Provide transparent pay scales	✔	✔
		● Conduct confidential surveys to assess perceptions of inclusivity and equity in the organization		✔

Area of Focus	Recommendation	Suggested Actions	Identified by	
			Roundtable	Best Practice
Promoting Equity-Deserving Talent	**7. Establish clear and consistent performance assessments**	● Implement fair performance assessment tools	✓	✓
Diverse Composition of Your Organization	8. **Capture diverse representation** of your workforce and identify potential gaps	● Conduct self-identification initiatives to better understand how diverse and equitable your workforce is	✓	✓
		● Compare diverse representation to industry and geographic benchmarks to identify strengths and areas for improvement		✓
EDI Knowledge and Skills	9. **Grow and advance diversity, inclusion and equity knowledge and skills** within your own practices	● Participate in EDI learning opportunities (e.g. OAA's Continuing Education Webinar training courses such as Unconscious Bias Training, etc.)	✓	✓
		● Celebrate diversity within your organization through social events (e.g. International potlucks)	✓	✓
		● Ensure EDI training is provided to all staff; including training Respectful Workplace behaviour, AODA, and the Human Rights Code	✓	✓

Area of Focus	Recommendation	Suggested Actions	Identified by	
			Roundtable	Best Practice
Pay Equity	10. **Create safe opportunities** for employees to raise potential concerns with compensation	● Implement pulse surveys (short, frequent anonymous surveys) inviting staff to weigh in on their compensation	✔	✔
		● Create open channels of communication to raise concerns and support discussions relating to pay equity concerns	✔	✔
	11. **Implement mechanisms to identify compensation inequities**	● Establish transparent pay scales based on, skill, effort, and responsibilities, etc.	✔	✔
		● Conduct pay equity audits, not only focused on women, but also on other equity-deserving groups, to identify potential gaps and discrepancies	✔	✔
Supporting EDI Advancement in the Industry	12. **Establish organizational values** that center equity, diversity and inclusion	● Create an EDI statement that demonstrates overarching commitment	✔	✔
		● Develop specific goals for organizations that ensure they are reflective of the local population	✔	✔
		● Establish EDI as a leadership priority, not an HR issue (e.g. ensure leaders understand the economic benefits of growing diversity, including increased productivity, improved stakeholder relations, ability to get federal government contracts, minimize legal costs from complaints (e.g. legal costs such as human rights/ discrimination claims).	✔	✔

Area of Focus	Recommendation	Suggested Actions	Identified by	
			Roundtable	Best Practice
	13. Advocate for equitable procurement processes and procedures	● Advocate for transparent cost structures that require equitable pay (i.e. not relying on unpaid/underpaid interns)	✓	✓
	14. Advocate for changes to awards programs	● Advocate for awards programs to take EDI into consideration (e.g. professional awards should consider fairness, equity, and global impact)	✓	✓
	15. Advocate for the respectful and fair treatment of interns	● Ensure fair compensation and working conditions for Intern Architects within your organization	✓	✓

5. Glossary

- **Diversity** refers to WHO we are. It includes the mix of our identities, experiences, and perspectives, including, but not limited to age, creed, ancestry, colour, race, citizenship, ethnic origin, place of origin, disability, family status, marital status, gender identity, gender expression, receipt of public assistance, record of offences, gender, and sexual orientation.

  Equity is about HOW we operate and the outcomes people experience. It includes ensuring fairness, transparency, and consistency in everything we do, including our policies, processes, and practices.

  Inclusion relates to WHAT people experience. It is a state in which all employees can be their authentic selves at work, feel that they belong and as though their differences are valued.

  *Equity-deserving groups are communities that face significant collective challenges in participating in society. This marginalization could be created by attitudinal, historic, social and environmental barriers based on age, creed, ancestry, colour, race, citizenship, ethnic origin, place of origin, disability, family status, marital status, gender identity, gender expression, receipt of public assistance, record of offences, gender, and sexual orientation, etc.

  * As defined from previous EDI Summary Report

6. Resources on Compensation

Hays Recruitment Agency provides free salary survey information and compensation trends for the architecture profession and other related office roles. Hays will provide this upon request from Alice Dibley who can be reached at alice.dibley@hays.com

The OAA have job posting boards for architecture firms with salary information.

The RAIC sells a book "A Guide to Determining Appropriate Fees for the Services of an Architect"

If you are a member of Society for Design Administration, you may be able to request some information.

This document is a resources tool based on participant feedback from the industry and the recommendations of a third party. It does not constitute legal advice or an interpretation of the law.