



HRx

# Promotion Policies with an Equity Lens

## 10 Tips for Building an Equitable Promotion Policy

March 2023

HRx acknowledges our respect for and deep gratitude to the Coast Salish Peoples, namely the səlililwətaʔt (Tseil-Waututh) and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) First Nations, and the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Indian Band on whose traditional territories we are honoured to operate.

# About HRx

HRx was founded in June 2016 and has grown to become a leading provider of practical, data-informed solutions for equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Over the years, we have partnered with hundreds of organizations across North America to build stronger, more inclusive teams. Through our comprehensive suite of consulting services, interactive training programs and data analytics, we help teams at any stage of their EDI journey. We drive sustainable change, whether that's the systems and processes that shape how we work, or the behaviours of the employees and leaders who bring cultures to life.

**We approach EDI as the critical organizational practice it is, by designing strategies that drive change at an institutional level and equipping individuals with the knowledge to help build inclusive cultures.**

## Systematic + Practical

We address the right issues at the right time to ensure a coordinated, streamlined & structured approach to change.

## Tailored

We ensure the unique culture of each team is reflected in our work to deliver relevant and high-impact outcomes.

## Data-Driven

We use data to assess the current landscape, influence decision-makers, prioritize high-impact initiatives & measure progress over time.



# Not everyone who should be promoted is.

Across industries and jobs, in companies of every size, the way people are promoted is often unfair and discriminatory. When the promotion process doesn't systemically account for the experiences of people from marginalized groups and the barriers they face, the biases of decision-makers are likely to negatively impact the growth of people from these groups. As a result, not everyone who should be promoted is.

**Discrimination directly – and negatively – impacts opportunities for career advancement.**

For example, data from the United States and Canada shows that people from marginalized groups experience lower promotion rates, especially if they have multiple parts of their identity that are marginalized<sup>12</sup>. (McKinsey, 2022)

Inequitable promotions also greatly affect diversity within leadership: Women in Canada represent just about or less than one-third of corporate director and executive officer roles. The numbers are even less for women of colour, with less than 10% holding board, executive and pipeline positions collectively<sup>3</sup>. In a global study, women are consistently underrepresented on executive teams and in the United States and the United Kingdom, “ethnic minorities” make up only 13% of executive teams even though their representation in the overall workforce and population is higher<sup>4</sup>. (McKinsey, 2020)

**Transparent and equity-focused promotion policies address bias and create clear pathways for career advancement and greater diversity at all levels of an organization.**





# What is a promotion policy and why does it matter?

A promotion policy is a set of guidelines that define how, when, and why an employee is eligible for a promotion. Typically developed by the human resource team, a promotion policy provides specific parameters by which an employee can qualify for a promotion.

An inclusive promotion policy promotes equity and reduces the advancement gap (the gap that occurs when marginalized groups are promoted at a slower rate). They are also critical for supporting internal mobility. By having an inclusive promotion policy, the path to career growth is clear, and employees can work towards their goals.

- According to data from LinkedIn's 2020 Global Talent Trends report, employees at companies that hire and promote more internal candidates stay 41% longer than workers at companies with lower internal hiring rates.
- A 2018, Harvard Business Review study of over 400,000 workers revealed that when employees believe promotions are managed effectively, they are more than twice as likely to give extra effort at work and to plan a long-term future with their company.

**When it comes to promotions, employees simply want to know that they're working towards something meaningful and have a fair shot at achieving it.** This way, employees will be more inclined to challenge themselves, seek feedback, and meet their goals.

Whether an organization has a formal policy in place or they're just getting started, a promotion policy focused on equitable outcomes can go a long way to help employees achieve their full potential. Equitable promotion policies systemically account for the barriers that people from marginalized groups face, making employees feel recognized and supported in their journey at the organization.

**An equitable and inclusive promotion policy also drives organizational performance.** It reinforces the types of behaviours and results leaders value, establishes a culture of trust, increases employee engagement and retention, and helps to build diversity across the talent pipeline over time.







# Promotion Policies through an Equity Lens

This guide was developed using the HRx Equity Lens Framework to help organizations assess the equity of their promotion policy. To be inclusive, organizations must recognize that people from marginalized groups face unique barriers that affect their likelihood of being promoted in the workplace. This framework offers four principles to help organizations identify those barriers and offer support to employees in the promotion process.

## Principle 1 Focus on Equity vs Equality



This means that policies do not follow a “one size fits all” approach; they acknowledge that our society is not equitable and provide resources and support accordingly. An equitable approach brings intentionality to the promotion process and enables organizations to achieve their EDI goals.

## Principle 2 Give Voice



Equitable policies give voice to those impacted by them - specifically people from marginalized groups. They include accessible mechanisms for providing feedback and periodic reviews with diverse stakeholders. These processes are clearly outlined in the policy, so everyone knows how to contribute to evaluating their impact and implementing improvements.

## Principle 3 Be Data-Driven



An inclusive and equitable organization collects data on the experiences of marginalized people on an ongoing basis, especially in relation to their policies. Data types can include demographics, feelings of inclusion, and qualitative input on the perception of policy effectiveness.

## Principle 4 Assign Resources



Equitable policies are supported by enough resources to ensure they are implemented in the most efficient and impactful way. Inclusive and accessible communication that reaches all stakeholders requires commitment and resources, and is a sign of true leadership commitment to EDI.

# 10 Tips for an Equitable Promotions Policy



By applying the HRx Equity Lens Framework to promotion policies, organizations reduce the advancement gap for marginalized groups who disproportionately face barriers in the promotion process and work towards adopting equitable practices that build diverse, high-performing teams. Based on the Framework, we recommend the following 10 tips for assessing a promotion policy.

## 01 State the Purpose

Purpose statements introduce the policy and promote clarity and transparency by defining the policy's goals and objectives. A clear purpose statement with defined goals is essential for ongoing policy review and assessment, as reviewers can easily compare the outcomes of the policy with its intended goals.

### A purpose statement should...

- » Define the goals and objectives of the policy.
- » State how the policy will help meet EDI goals.
- » Align the policy with organizational goals.
- » Include Truth and Reconciliation principles.
- » Be in line with federal and provincial legislation and standards.



#### FOR EXAMPLE

**Purpose:** This promotion policy provides guidelines for advancing and promoting employees within our organization, and making adjustments to pay, job title and responsibilities. The policy implements systemic processes and practices for managers to follow when promoting employees.

Our goal is to implement an equitable process that retains top talent and fosters a diverse, high-performing team [2022-25 Strategic Plan]. We want to invest in our employees and reward those who perform well.

## 02 Define the Scope

Effective promotion policies clearly communicate the scope of the policy and to who it applies. While the scope of a promotion policy is usually limited to internal promotion, it can intersect with hiring, career development, performance review policies and processes, and other strategic initiatives. A promotion policy should share whether or not these policies and processes will be outlined in the promotion policy itself or elsewhere.



The scope should answer the following questions.

1. Which of the following groups does the policy apply to? For example:

- Interns
- Volunteers
- Practicum Students
- Permanent Employees
- Full-Time Employees
- Part-Time Employees
- Contract Employees
- Seasonal Employees
- Employees who have passed the 3-month probationary period

2. Does the policy address other related initiatives?

- EDI
- Hiring
- Performance Review
- Career Development
- Performance Improvement Plan



### FOR EXAMPLE

**Scope:** This promotion policy applies to all permanent employees, both full-time and part-time, who have been working at our organization for longer than three months. The promotion policy does not apply to employees who are working with our organization on a contract or limited basis.

The policy does not provide information about hiring but does share important information about career development. For information about hiring, please see our [Hiring Policy](#).



If the policy addresses related EDI initiatives such as inclusive hiring or succession planning, we recommend linking to these policies or sharing where these policies can be found.

# 03

## Establish a Review Process

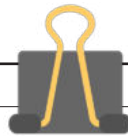


To ensure that the promotion policy is up to date, it can include periodic review dates, clear policy review processes and the date the policy goes into effect.

**Policy Review Timeline:** Promotion policies should be reviewed at least every three years or when new yearly plans, legislation or strategic initiatives are introduced. Organizations can also review the promotion policy when new EDI data is collected to ensure that the organization is not biased in promoting certain groups over others.



### FOR EXAMPLE



**Effective Date:** This promotion policy was inaugurated on March 1, 2022 and will be effective on March 1, 2022.

**Review Dates:** The policy is intended to be reviewed once per calendar year, on or within 4 weeks of March 1 by the Policy Review Panel, subject to their availability.

**Policy Name:** Promotion Policy      **Policy Owner:** Director of Human Resources

**Policy Reviewers:** Policy Review Panel      **Current Version:** 2.0

**Approved by (date):** Policy Review Panel on March 1, 2023

**Next Review Date:** March 1, 2024

**Feedback & Update Tracking:** On March 1, 2023, the Policy Review Panel recommended that the policy be updated to remove gendered language.

Recommendations were accepted and updates were made accordingly. No other recommendations and changes were made in this review.

**Policy Review Process:** To limit bias, build trust and encourage inclusion, the policy should be reviewed by a diverse panel of stakeholders from across the organization. Panel members should be encouraged to provide input on the policy from multiple perspectives, including their professional expertise and lived experience. The policy review process, including who can join the panel and how decisions are made, should be included in the policy to ensure transparency. The following questions can be used to guide the policy review panel when conducting assessments.

- » Did the policy achieve its stated goal?
- » Is the language inclusive and up to date with today's standards?
- » Was there any exposure to bias?
- » Is the policy helping to meet our EDI goals?



## 04 Include Definitions



Accessible, transparent and inclusive policies include definitions of important words and technical terms to help readers follow along.



### FOR EXAMPLE

The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat outlines the following definitions on the first page of their promotion policy: allowance, annual rate, appointment document, certificate of appointment, equalization adjustment, hourly rate (of pay), lowest pay increment, and one rate of pay <sup>5</sup>.

**Define “Promotion:”** In addition to defining technical terms, it is important to define what it means to be promoted. In general, promotions are the “upward advancement of an employee to a position with better pay and privileges, a more prominent profile, and increased job responsibilities <sup>6</sup>.” In Canada and the United States, organizations usually practice one of the three promotion styles.

**Horizontal:** “Increase in title and pay for an employee, but with little to no change in responsibilities. These promotions, also known as an “up-gradation,” recognize an employee who has gone above and beyond in their role, offers them fair contribution but does not ask them to take on more.”

**Dry:** “Involve all the responsibility of a new title, but without the benefits that come with it. In other words, the company will ask more of the employee but will not provide compensation or recognition in return <sup>7</sup>.” In Canada, more and more organizations are offering promotions without a pay increase <sup>8</sup>.

Your organization should strongly consider whether or not they will be offering dry promotions. In many cases, dry promotions can lower morale, especially if they are unexpected or not communicated in the promotion policy. Dry promotions can also disproportionately affect employees from marginalized groups.

**Vertical:** Vertical promotions are most commonly used and also considered best practices. They consist of “upward movement, more senior job titles, higher salaries, and more responsibilities. In other words, vertical promotions ask the employee to contribute more and give them a more senior seat at the table. This type of promotion may also change the nature of the job by adding leadership responsibilities or more direct reports.”

“There’s pressure to respond to requests for a career progression amongst a team, but (employers are) not feeling like they’re in a position where they can put their money where their mouth is and commit financially <sup>9</sup>.”

**Rowan O’Grady, President  
Hays Recruitment.**

# 05

## Map Requirements and Benefits

An equitable promotion policy maps out the requirements and benefits for promotions at each level of the organization. This provides employees with a clear path for growth and a concrete understanding of what is necessary to qualify for promotions based on their level.



For example, a promotion policy may map the following information across the organization:

- » Organization Hierarchy or Levels
- » Job Types and Specific Positions
- » Requirements or “Must Haves”
- » Performance Indicators
- » Salary Ranges

**Publish salary ranges.** To promote equity, organizations are moving towards a transparent compensation model that openly shares salary ranges and compensation for each position or level of the organization. In some places around the world, pay transparency is also being legislated; for example, the City of New York now requires all employers with more than four employees to share salary ranges in their job postings <sup>10</sup>.



# 06

## Set Organization-Wide Promotion Criteria

In addition to mapping out the requirements and benefits for each level of the organization, a promotion policy should set organization-wide promotion criteria. Establishing these criteria sets the tone for what is valued and what gets rewarded at an organizational level. This builds trust within the team and helps employers to reinforce their organizational values and desired behaviours.



The following nine criteria are commonly used to evaluate employees' performance and promotion eligibility. We have highlighted which are considered best practices, which should be carefully implemented and avoided altogether.

### → Best Practices

- 1. Achievement of Set Goals:** During periodic performance reviews, managers should systematically set specific, measurable and achievable goals in collaboration with employees. Considering the achievement of these goals is the best way to mitigate bias in promotions and is the best way to measure performance. These set goals can be related to sales, profit, overcoming challenges, working on new projects, learning new skills, and meeting timelines, for example.
- 2. Contribution to Organizational Goals and EDI:** Helping meet organizational goals and contributing to EDI can be a critical part of employees' set goals outlined in their performance reviews. If these goals are measurable on an organizational level, it will be much easier to track them in one-on-one performance reviews.

### → Implement Carefully

- 3. Customer Satisfaction:** Customer satisfaction can be a valuable tool to measure performance only if measures are taken to identify bias and gather accurate feedback. Marginalized employees can receive customer feedback that is biased and unrelated to their performance. If an organization chooses to include customer satisfaction in the criteria, they should share specific customer satisfaction goals and be transparent about the data collection and analysis process.
- 4. Merit:** The definition of merit is “something that deserves or justifies a reward <sup>11</sup>.” Merit is only useful in a promotions policy if it can be clearly defined and measured. Otherwise, the term can present an opportunity for bias.
- 5. Demonstration of Organizational Values:** Because organizational values tend to be loosely defined and difficult to measure, they can present opportunities for bias. Alignment with organizational values can also present bias in terms of “culture fit” over “culture add.” Culture fit is when organizations hire employees who maintain the status quo rather than employees who add new skills, experiences, personalities, and backgrounds to the organization <sup>12</sup>. If organizations would like candidates to demonstrate organizational values, ensure that they are not based on western or colonial values, and that they can be defined and measured.

**6. Time Since Last Promotion:** An employee's time since their last promotion can be a helpful indicator of when employees should be considered for a promotion. That being said, the time since an employee was last promoted should not be criteria for promotion on its own because it does not indicate an employee's fit for additional or new responsibilities.

→ **Avoid (if possible):**

**7. Seniority and Tenure:** Many organizations promote employees based on their level and/or time working in the organization. These criteria can pose barriers to marginalized groups, especially if the upper levels of an organization are not diverse. While seniority and tenure can demonstrate commitment to an organization, it does not necessarily reflect the ability to succeed in new roles.

**8. Assessment of Potential:** Potential is difficult to measure and determine. In some cases, bias can inform whether or not people envision someone from a marginalized group in a higher position. If an organization chooses to use assessment of potential as one of its promotion criteria, we recommend clearly defining the potential in relation to other metrics (for example, sales potential, leadership potential etc.) and sharing how this potential will be measured.

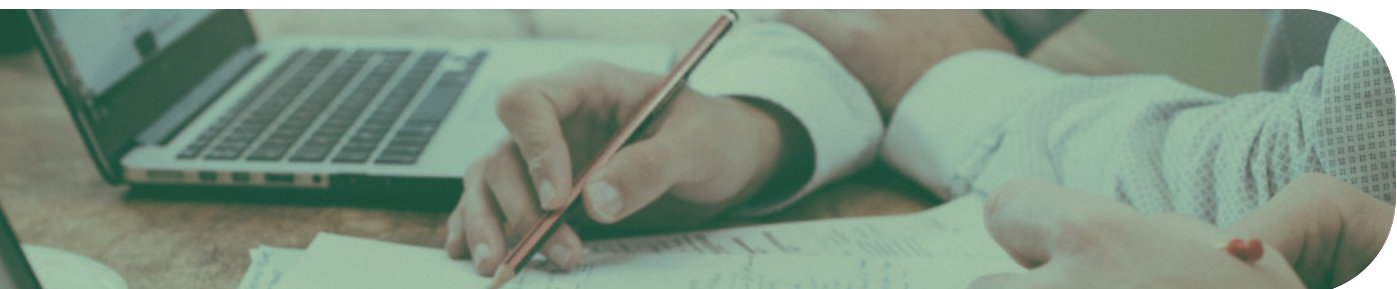
Data on nearly 30,000 management track employees from a large North American retail chain revealed that women received substantially lower potential ratings despite receiving higher job performance ratings

- **Potential and the Gender Promotion Gap, 2022** <sup>13</sup>.

**9. Absence Rate, Sick Days, Vacation Days, Accommodations, Compensation & Disability Claims:** Some organizations track absence rate, sick days, vacation days, accommodations, compensation claims and related factors when considering employees' suitability for promotion. We strongly recommend that organizations avoid using these criteria because they can be discriminatory, do not promote a healthy work-life balance and ignore the personal, familial, accessibility and health needs of employees.

These nine criteria reflect the bigger picture of an employee's work as it aligns with the organization. In addition to outlining the criteria required for a promotion, an equitable promotion policy may also address bias criteria for promotions which will not be tolerated, such as:

- » Subjective Evaluations
- » Bias
- » Discrimination
- » Favouritism
- » Nepotism



# 07

## Measure Employee Performance



Based on the criteria selected above, an organization can decide how it will measure performance to evaluate employees. Before communicating these measures in the policy, ensure that there is enough funding available for employees to participate in these efforts. Use the following questions to determine how to measure employee performance.

### How will employees' progress be measured?

- Performance Review Meetings
- Post-Project Review Meetings
- Colleague Feedback
- Leadership Feedback
- Customer Satisfaction

### How will their fit for promotion be evaluated?

- Promotion Interview(s)
- Promotion Review Panel
- Self Assessment Exercise
- Manager Feedback
- Colleague Feedback
- Leadership Feedback

*“A high performer should be rewarded and not simply promoted. The potential to add more responsibilities and reward good performance in the current role are two different things. Organizations tend to reward top talent through promoting them without understanding whether they have the potential to take up new responsibilities successfully <sup>15</sup>.”*

Leading organizations systemically include diverse selection panels as a part of their promotion process. According to the University of Washington, your organization can implement the following steps to create an inclusive and diverse panel <sup>14</sup>.

- » Develop intentional criteria for selecting panel members
  - Ensure every committee member has participated in implicit bias and EDI training
  - Ensure that there is a diversity of identity and level within the committee
- » Determine the best way to raise instances of bias
- » Create a checklist based on “must have” and “nice to have” criteria
- » Develop inclusive interview questions based on the criteria
- » Include at least one EDI commitment-related question for the interview
- » Confirm components of a “quality” answer for each question
- » After the interview, debrief immediately and deliberately
- » Identify strengths first for every candidate
- » Review and confirm that the criteria has remained consistent throughout the process
- » Group candidates in categories (e.g. minimally qualified, qualified, highly qualified)



# 08

## Share Promotion Opportunities

Sharing promotion opportunities with all employees in the organization helps promote transparency and inclusion. In some cases, organizations may directly offer promotions to high performers or expect employees to inquire about promotions on their own. While these practices may not intentionally create barriers, employees may feel excluded from career advancement opportunities if they have not been made aware of promotion opportunities. In addition, employees from marginalized groups may experience internalized discrimination, which can prevent them from self-advocating for promotions.



### To promote transparency and inclusion:

1. **Establish a process for sharing job openings**, such as posting on the organization's internal site and sharing the posting through a company-wide email.
2. **Communicate this standardized process** in the promotion policy.
3. **Include details in the posting** such as salary range, responsibilities, requirements and expectations for the role, and an expected timeline for application submission.
4. **Be intentional about sharing the opportunities.** While sharing information about promotions is essential, sometimes, it might not be enough to get people from marginalized groups to apply. Due to several factors, including bias and internalized discrimination, people from marginalized groups might need encouragement to apply for promotions. For this reason, we emphasize the importance of intentionality; we recommend ongoing goal-setting and having open conversations about career planning and development.

### Intentionality: Google Encourages Women Applicants

To encourage women to apply for promotions at Google, Alan Eustace, Head of Engineering, sought research on women and girls in schools and the workplace. He discovered two studies that revealed women and girls avoid raising their hands in school and contributing to workplace conversations, even though their ideas are rated better and more accurate than their peers.

As a gentle reminder, he included information about these studies when sending email reminders to team members about promotions. "Immediately, the application rate for women soared and the rate of women who received promotions rose higher than that for male engineers. Every time Eustace sent the same email reminder, female promotion rates climbed. When he once forgot to send that email, the number of female applicants dropped sharply <sup>16</sup>." (*Washington Post*, 2021)

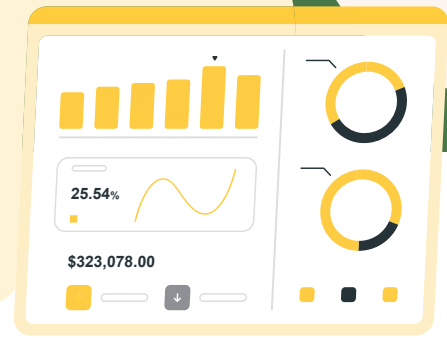
While this example does not tackle systemic or cultural issues at Google, it is a good example of intentionality and the value of sharing information to help remove barriers.

# 09

## Collect Data & Feedback

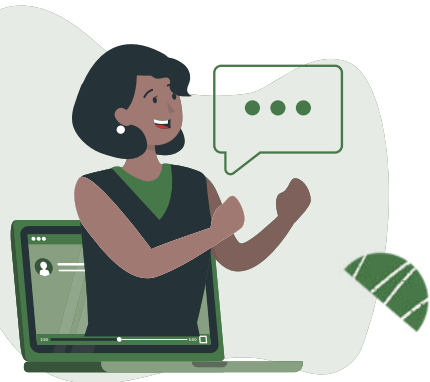
Data and feedback are an integral part of any organization's effort to be equitable, diverse and inclusive. Collecting information about the promotion policy and process helps identify barriers,

prioritize initiatives and measure progress over time. To reach a diverse group of stakeholders and encourage meaningful feedback, we recommend the following mechanisms.



### Best practices for feedback and data collection:

- 1. Document Rationale.** When employees are not selected for promotions, it is recommended that hiring managers are required to provide documented reasoning that is submitted to HR. This systemic step can be outlined in the promotion policy and HR processes.
- 2. Debrief Meeting.** Conduct a short debrief meeting for employees not selected for a promotion. This meeting can include structured questions designed to collect feedback and provide the employee with an opportunity to discuss their career goals and other opportunities for advancement.
- 3. Ask for Feedback.** Offer employees the opportunity to provide feedback on the promotion policy and process by sharing a link to an anonymous feedback form and providing a designated email. For example: "We welcome any feedback or suggestions on how to improve the promotion process. Please email [hello@hrx.tech](mailto:hello@hrx.tech) with your questions, suggestions and feedback."
- 4. Collect and Report on Data.** By collecting employee demographic data and analyzing it throughout the employee lifecycle, organizations will know if they need to dig deeper and investigate potential instances of bias and discrimination.



# 10

## Educate Team Members

An equitable and inclusive promotion policy is only effective if employees and people leaders know it's there and know how to use it. When rolling out a new or revised promotion policy (or any policy for that matter), it is important to inform the entire organization about the changes - why it was revised and what is included.

The way organizations inform their teams will vary but one effective strategy is to pair the rollout to some form of education or training such as a webinar. A training session or webinar creates an opportunity to raise awareness about important topics such as equity and inclusion, provide context to the policy updates and typically engages more people versus a "dry update."

Educating an organization about the policy will build trust because employees will perceive the process as fair and transparent. It will also support hiring managers with necessary parameters for an equitable process and reduce the risk of bias, discrimination and favoritism - which can sneak into the process even for the most well intentioned.



# Beyond the Promotion Policy

An equitable promotion policy reflects an understanding that people face barriers in the promotion process, and that these barriers disproportionately impact people from marginalized groups. An equitable policy equips employees and people leaders with parameters that help to remove bias, discrimination and favoritism from the process. Improving promotion policies is a practical way for organizations to reduce the advancement gap but in isolation, it is not the solution to an equitable, diverse and inclusive organization. To ensure diverse talent has a path to enter and grow in your organization, we recommend applying the HRx equity lens to all processes and policies across the employee lifecycle.



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