Applicant Demographic Data Collection:
A Practical Guide for Employers

WHY IT MATTERS

Organizations are increasingly collecting voluntary demographic information during the recruitment process to better understand who is applying for opportunities and whether their hiring practices are creating equitable access for all candidates.

Without data, it can be difficult to identify where barriers may exist. Organizations may have good intentions, but assumptions alone cannot reveal whether certain groups are disproportionately exiting the recruitment process at specific stages.

Applicant demographic data helps organizations answer important questions such as:

- Who is applying to our opportunities?
- Are certain groups being screened out at higher rates?
- Where are barriers occurring throughout the candidate journey?
- How can we improve our recruitment practices over time?

When implemented thoughtfully, demographic data becomes a valuable tool for evaluating recruitment systems and supporting more inclusive hiring practices.

Insight: Demographic data should never be used to make hiring decisions. Its purpose is to evaluate recruitment processes, not individual candidates.

COLLECTING APPLICANT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Can we collect applicant demographic data? Short answer: Yes.

Canadian employers are permitted to collect voluntary applicant demographic information for the purpose of identifying and addressing potential barriers within recruitment processes.

While some federally regulated employers are required to collect workforce representation data under the Employment Equity Act, many organizations that are not subject to these requirements are voluntarily adopting applicant demographic surveys as a leading practice.

Yes, if:
- ✔ Participation is voluntary
- ✔ Candidates understand why data is collected
- ✔ Data is not used in hiring decisions
- ✔ Privacy safeguards are in place

Insight: Transparency is one of the biggest drivers of participation. Clearly explain why information is being collected, how it will be used, and who will have access to it.

Reverse Discrimination

Could candidates argue reverse discrimination? This is a common concern, but collecting demographic data alone does not constitute reverse discrimination. Risk is significantly reduced when organizations are transparent about how information will be used and establish clear safeguards to ensure demographic data is never used to influence hiring decisions.

HOW TO COLLECT

Organizations typically use one of two collection approaches:

Anonymous Collection	Linked Collection
Completed separately from the application process	Connected to an applicant's recruitment journey
May increase comfort and participation	Provides deeper insights into where barriers exist
Cannot identify where candidates exit the process	Able to examine representation at each hiring stage
Lower privacy risk	Requires stronger privacy controls

For organizations looking to identify systemic barriers, a linked approach often provides the most actionable insights and identifies where candidates may disproportionately exit the recruitment process.

Insight: Start with the end in mind. Determine what questions you are trying to answer and how the insights will be used to improve your recruitment process.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Keep questions focused, voluntary, and purposeful.

CORE CATEGORIES

Indigenous identity

Race and ethnicity

Gender identity

Disability

ADDITIONAL CATEGORIES

Sexual orientation

Neurodiversity

Veteran status

Citizenship status

Best Practices

✓ Explain why each question is being asked.
✓ Include a "Prefer not to answer" option.
✓ Allow candidates to select multiple responses, where applicable.
✓ Use current, inclusive language.
✓ Avoid collecting information that will not be used.

Language Matters

Some terminology found in older legislation is no longer considered best practice. Use current and inclusive language. Terminology evolves over time, so review demographic questions regularly to ensure they reflect current best practices and the communities they are intended to represent.

Questions are asked in two common formats, either individual questions for each category with multiple choice options or as a question with Yes/No/Prefer Not to Answer options for each category such as:
Do you identify as a member of the following group? Indigenous, First Nations, Inuit, or Métis; Person of Colour; 2SLBGTQIA+; a Person with a Disability; Women or Gender Diverse?

Insight: Short, well-designed surveys generate higher participation and more meaningful insights. Focus on a fewer, purposeful questions.

BUILDING CANDIDATE TRUST

Clear communication is one of the most important factors in successful implementation.

Your messaging should reassure candidates that:

- Participation is voluntary.
- Responses will not influence hiring decisions.
- Information will be analyzed in aggregate.
- Data is confidential and securely stored.
- Candidates can update or withdraw responses.

Sample Messaging

"We are collecting voluntary demographic information to better understand overall applicant representation and identify opportunities to improve the inclusiveness of our recruitment practices. Your responses will not be shared with hiring managers or used to make decisions about your application."

USING THE COLLECTED DATA

Demographic data should be used to identify trends, not evaluate individuals. Organizations can examine representation throughout the recruitment process, including application, screening, interviews, final selection and hiring.

Over time, this information can help answer questions such as:

- Are certain groups exiting the process at higher rates?
- Are recruitment strategies reaching diverse talent pools?
- Are hiring practices creating equitable opportunities?
- Where should improvements be prioritized?

Insight: Data should always be reviewed in aggregate and access should be limited to a small group responsible for analysis and reporting.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Collecting applicant demographic data is not about quotas or preferential hiring. It is about understanding candidate experiences, identifying barriers, and continuously improving recruitment practices.

Organizations that implement demographic data collection successfully are transparent, intentional, and thoughtful in how they collect, protect, and use the information.



How We Can Help

Implementing applicant demographic data collection often requires decisions around survey design, privacy considerations, technology systems, candidate communications, and data analysis. We can help organizations design an approach that is practical, compliant, and tailored to their unique recruitment process.

Ready to get started? Contact us at hello@inclusivityinsight.com

Resources

- British Columbia Office of the Human Rights Commissioner
- Canadian Human Rights Commission
- Employment Equity Act
- Employment Equity Regulations
- Federal privacy legislation (PIPEDA)
- Provincial privacy legislation (FIPPA and MFIPPA)