

# Minorities still see barriers in way to the top

In groundbreaking study, seasoned pros say they perceive more obstacles and feel less career satisfaction than white colleagues

BY WALLACE IMMEN

Natasha Kassim regularly hears grumbling from colleagues and friends who believe that being a member of a visible minority holds them back in their careers.

The grumbling apparently goes beyond her circle, suggests a groundbreaking study released yesterday, which finds that many managers and professionals from visible minorities say they perceive more barriers in their career advancement than their white colleagues.

And while employers have established programs and policies to address inequality, there is still a gap between what employers believe they have achieved and what employees say they experience, found *Career Advancement in Corporate Canada*, the largest national survey ever conducted about career satisfaction and advancement of visible minorities.

"There is still a mindset that we are victims of discrimination. They think there is a reason other than their skills and capabilities why a Caucasian colleague gets a promotion rather than them," says Ms. Kassim, a Guyanese-born immigrant who started in 1985 as a part-time teller with Royal Bank of Canada and is now the bank's human resources business partner for Toronto.

The research looks, for the first time, at the long-term success of minority groups in fulfilling their career goals, says Deborah Gillis, executive company Catalyst Canada, which did the study in co-operation with the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University.

The responses came from 12,000 non-minority managers and executives as well as 4,500 people in similar roles who identified themselves as visible minorities, all selected at random from 43 large public and private companies across the country. Respondents had an average of 20 years of work experience in Canada.

Notably, 47 per cent of visible minority managers and professionals reported feeling they were held to a higher standard of performance than their peers within their organizations. That compares with 34 per cent of Caucasians who felt the same way.

And 69 per cent of visible minority respondents reported believing that "who you know" is more important than "what you know" in their career. This compares with 57 per cent of white respondents.

The findings also show:  
|| **Less satisfaction with career progress.** Among respondents, 54 per cent of visible minorities reported feeling satisfied with how they were meeting career advancement goals, compared with 67 per cent of Caucasian.



Royal Bank's Natasha Kassim: 'We, as visible minority employees, need to be part of the solution.' TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Lisa Mattam, Mattam Group

|| **Perceived barriers.** Minority employees were more likely to see a lack of fairness in career advancement processes, an absence of role models, inequality in performance standards and fewer high-visibility assignments. The 38 per cent of visible minority respondents who believed their organizations' talent identification practices were fair compared with 46 per cent of their Caucasian colleagues.

|| **Gap between promise and reality.** While 58 per cent of the employers reported having a diversity program, just 48 per cent of visible minority managers felt their senior management consistently demonstrates commitment to diversity.

Addressing the perceived

barriers is important to the country's future economic growth, the report warns. By 2017, visible minorities are expected to represent one in five people in Canada's available work force. In major cities across the country, the visible minority representation in the labour force will be closer to half, the report says.

This comes at a time when the aging baby boom generation will be retiring while the domestic birth rate is low, which points to an impending labour shortage unless Canada continues to attract skilled immigrants by offering opportunities to develop good careers, the report says.

Still, the news is not all bleak, says Wendy Cukier, associate dean and founder of Ryerson's Diversity Institute.

For instance, virtually all the respondents of any background said they are committed to their organizations and support actions to increase diversity.

"On balance, we must conclude that the glass is half empty — there is lots to be done. But it is also half full — significant progress has been

made and many companies are pro-actively working to improve inclusiveness in the workplace," she said.

Support efforts pay off. Satisfaction levels were as much as 20 per cent higher among both visible minority and white employees in companies that offer programs such as mentoring and networking and have written and transparent career advancement practices, Ms. Cukier said.

Such management support can break down perceived barriers to advancement, says Lisa Mattam, principal of Mattam Group, a Toronto consultancy that runs workshops leadership and diversity issues.

"The barriers can be considered small, but it is the small things that can disengage an individual," Ms. Mattam says. "I don't think the barriers come from malice or bad intent but rather from a lack of understanding."

Much of the perceived inequity comes down to a misunderstanding of differences in cultural values, Ms. Mattam says. For instance, her family came from India and, early in her career, she worked in a

large office where most of the employees were not familiar with Indian customs. One day, she came to the office the day after attending an Indian wedding and still had traditional henna decorations on her hands. A co-worker complained to her manager and Ms. Mattam was reprimanded. "It made me feel that I don't belong, even though professionally I was performing well," Ms. Mattam says.

Other barriers can be the perception of feeling isolated or standing out in organizations that employ few, if any, minority workers. "Visible minorities can look around and not see anyone like them as mentors or role models." But these are barriers that organizations can eliminate by focusing on people as individuals rather than a homogeneous work force, she says.

"You have to understand that people from different cultures may have different goals and may not be as self-promoting as Canadians from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds."

Royal Bank's Ms. Kassim has some advice for those who feel the road to success is blocked:

## What employers can do

Informal policies are not enough to eliminate perceived barriers to promotion for visible minorities, according to the study *Career Advancement in Corporate Canada*. Here are its tips for employers:

|| **Assess the needs.** Visible minority respondents say they want their input about their challenges and aspirations to be included in workplace diversity programs.

|| **Make diversity a core value.** The importance of minorities to economic success means equity should be elevated to a strategic priority for organizations.

|| **Champion from the top.** Commitment from senior management is essential to making initiatives work throughout the organization.

|| **Bring in formal and transparent standards.** Clear practices for promotion need to be written and used in all departments to reduce the perception that informal mechanisms are in place.

|| **Develop an accounting system.** Respondents in the study noted that diversity and inclusion are seldom reported and tracked by organizations. There should be clear and relevant measuring of minority advancement and change over time.

|| **Provide support.** Employers should provide mentors and identify role models who minority employees can turn to, along with networking opportunities and high-profile assignments that strive for advancement.

Wallace Immen

hard work, continuing education and working with your employer will prove that most barriers are more perception than reality.

In every instance in which she didn't get a promotion in the past, she says she looked more closely and realized it was not because her competition had an in, but that the other person was simply more qualified, she says.

"I always took the position that it was essentially up to me to prove myself by continuously building my skills. And, as a result, I have enjoyed a progressively successful career," she says.

It is not the sole responsibility of an organization or politicians to fix gaps, Ms. Kassim adds. "I feel very strongly that we, as visible minority employees, need to be part of the solution. If we choose to identify a situation as a barrier and do nothing about it, then it will be a barrier."

"We can take disappointments and challenges thrown at us and be a victim, or turn them into opportunities. At the end of the day, it is within us to be what we want to be."