

# RENT A MINORITY: DIVERSITY ON DEMAND AND THE ILLUSION OF INCLUSION

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Imagine if solving complex issues like diversity and equity could be as simple as pushing a button. What if "diversity on demand" was just a call away?

The conversation around Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) could be transformed if we could hire a token representative—perhaps the "intellectual Black man," the "smiling Muslim woman," or the "ethnically ambiguous" individual—simply for a fee. This absurdity was brought to light in 2016 by Arwa Mahdawi through her satirical website [rentaminority.com](http://rentaminority.com), which exposed the uncomfortable reality that many major corporations were eager to embrace such a service. In her TEDx talk, Mahdawi shared how over a thousand ethnic minorities were willing to take on the role of the "diversity hire"—a figure paraded in front of others to showcase the company's supposed commitment to inclusivity.<sup>1</sup>

There's a misconception that being a minority guarantees an easy path to success in life and work. I'm brown, I'm a woman, and I'm neurodivergent. In terms of diversity hiring, I am a 3-for-1 bargain. Yet, my own personal and professional experiences have shown me otherwise—just how far from the truth this idea really is.

In fact, my first encounter with overt racism happened when I was just six years old. My family and I were expatriates in the Middle East, and one day, while walking home from the local bodega, my father and I were confronted by a group of angry young men. Their jeep had jumped the curb, and they jumped out, brandishing metal pipes and bats, yelling and spitting at us. One phrase that has unfortunately become all too familiar was shouted, "Go back to your own country." My father stood protectively in front of me, choosing to remain silent instead of retaliating. He waited for them to grow bored and leave us alone. Those words, sharp and dismissive, were some of the first I ever heard that made me feel like an outsider. I was just a child, standing by my father, when strangers spat hate at us. My father didn't respond. Instead, he stood in front of me like a shield, and his quiet strength spoke volumes. He waited for the moment to pass, for those people to grow bored and walk away. But even at that young age, I couldn't understand why he had to endure it, why his mere existence seemed to draw such hostile attention. My father is an accountant by profession, deeply religious, a law-abiding citizen, and a proud homeowner. Yet no matter how many titles or accomplishments he has, it's his skin colour and the assumptions made about him that often speak louder than anything else.

Many years later, my family migrated to Canada. I was suddenly uprooted from a small, close-knit group of expatriates living in designated housing in a Middle Eastern city to a bustling North American metropolitan town predominantly populated by Caucasians. In my new high school, which had around 1,300 students, there were only a few of us who identified as visible minorities. Like many immigrant children, I quickly adapted to my surroundings. I mimicked the accents I heard around me, changed my style of dress, and, almost overnight, my lunches shifted from home-cooked desi tiffins to peanut butter and jam sandwiches. Despite these changes, I still didn't quite fit in with those around me, and because of them, I no longer felt at home with the community I had come from.

"You've changed" became a frequent phrase my mother used during her disciplinary talks. To me, change felt like an insult, and it was demoralizing for a teenage girl who was struggling to find her place in a new community. It only deepened my sense of isolation. My uncertainty about where I fit in only intensified when I entered the veterinary profession. At veterinary technologist school, there were no instructors who looked like me, and in most practices I worked at, the management staff rarely resembled me either. I struggled to envision where my life and career were headed.

Earlier in my career as an RVT at a busy emergency practice, a coveted supervisory position became available. I had the qualifications, stellar performance reviews, and the support of my colleagues. Yet, despite multiple inquiries on my end, weeks passed without feedback, only for me to later discover that the hiring manager chose a recent graduate—who happened to be white and connected to her through family ties. When I sought clarity in a private meeting, the hiring manager's response was disheartening: "I didn't think



## “REAL PROGRESS REQUIRES MORE THAN MERE TOKEN GESTURES.”

someone like you would seriously be interested in a supervisory position.” Those words "someone like you" stayed with me for a long time. They echoed in my mind. It wasn't just the words themselves, but the underlying message, which was a constant reminder of the subtle yet powerful ways that exclusion and bias can manifest.

Her comment left me feeling defeated as I knew I had encountered a glass ceiling. My choices were stark—stay in my current role indefinitely or leave in pursuit of advancement elsewhere. Setting aside my years of seniority, I chose to move on from that practice. My story is not unique; it resonates with many in veterinary medicine. Employees who have been disengaged over a long period of time eventually seek out employment opportunities on their own in which they feel they will be able to add value. High turnover rates serve as an indication that there is a lack of inclusion or utilization of talent within an organization.<sup>2</sup> Turnover has a significant cost for organizations, considering recruitment and on-boarding expenses in addition to the loss of skills, competencies, and experiences of previous talent. It's estimated to cost an average of six to nine months of an employee's salary to replace them.<sup>3</sup>

As we move further into 2024, the communities we live in, work in, and serve are more diverse than ever, yet leadership continues to lag in truly reflecting the demographic shifts we are witnessing in society. Despite the focus on hiring minorities as a solution to the diversity crisis, the reality in veterinary corporate leadership remains far from inclusive. Boardrooms are still predominantly male and overwhelmingly white, revealing a persistent gap between the diversity of the workforce and the persons who shape organizational decisions. This disconnect highlights the limitations of superficial diversity initiatives, which, at their core, often miss the mark when it comes to creating meaningful, lasting change in both organizational culture and decision-making power. Without true representation at the highest levels, DEI initiatives risk becoming little more than a token gesture rather than a catalyst for real transformation.

You may be wondering, "Why does any of this matter as long as the job gets done?"

The answer is simple. Without diverse representation, fostering a sense of belonging becomes nearly impossible. Diversity should extend beyond stock photos of racially diverse individuals on company websites; it should permeate every level of an organization.

In researching this article, I examined the composition of upper management teams at the largest veterinary corporations. At one company alone, there was just one woman of color among over 70 senior management positions. Such statistics illustrate how heavily the odds are stacked against minorities in this field. When aspiring professionals from minority backgrounds lack role models who share their backgrounds and experiences, reaching for leadership roles feels unattainable. If minorities are denied a voice in the spaces where decisions are made, how can we expect meaningful change? How do we trust that our values, our voices, and our concerns are receiving equal consideration behind those closed doors? How can we remain optimistic about a future where diverse perspectives are genuinely valued in shaping our work lives?

Real progress requires more than mere token gestures. Inclusion and the utilization of diversity has been linked to metrics such as increased brand quality, talent retention, business expansion, improved perceptions of culture and organic attraction of more diverse talent.<sup>4</sup> Rather than focusing solely on representation or the promotion of diverse talent, the key to successful sustainable collaboration lies in simply getting out of our own way and including and maximizing the potential of the qualified talent currently present within our industry on a consistent basis by confronting biases and eliminating systemic barriers. In a world that thrives on diversity, equity, and belonging, it's crucial to recognize that our differences are not just statistics but stories waiting to be told. True progress means creating spaces where everyone's voice is heard, valued, and empowered—because when we all belong, we all rise together.

To save space, the references for this article are made available on the Chapter's website at [www.canadianveterinarians.net/sbcv/west-coast-veterinarian-magazine](http://www.canadianveterinarians.net/sbcv/west-coast-veterinarian-magazine). **WCV**

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