

Queer Atlantic Business Hub- Environmental Scan Highlights



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Executive summary

Between July and December 2025, Sea Change CoLab, in partnership with the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce, led a regional environmental scan focused on the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs across Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island.

The scan combined survey responses, interviews, and regional engagement led by trusted community partners. In total, 111 people completed the survey and 29 in depth interviews were conducted. Additional provincial context was provided through partner led research in New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Across all four provinces, queer and trans entrepreneurs described similar motivations for starting businesses. Many turned to entrepreneurship as a way to gain autonomy, align their work with their values, and create safer environments than those available in traditional workplaces. For some, starting a business was a response to exclusion, burnout, or inflexible systems. For others, it was a way to stay in their home community while living more authentically.

At the same time, entrepreneurs described persistent barriers. These include difficulty accessing funding, financial literacy challenges, mental health strain, isolation, lack of mentorship, and limited access to queer affirming and bilingual business supports. These barriers are intensified in rural and small town contexts and for entrepreneurs who are trans, disabled, racialized, Indigenous, or francophone.

What we heard clearly is that relationships matter more than programs. Peer support, trusted mentors, and community connections are often more impactful than formal business services. Where formal supports exist, they are often hard to navigate, linguistically inaccessible, or not designed with queer realities in mind.

There is strong interest across the region in the Queer Atlantic Business Hub. Participants want a bilingual, relationship centred, Atlantic wide structure that connects entrepreneurs to each other, reduces isolation, improves access to practical supports, and advocates for change in business and policy environments.

Why this work matters

Atlantic Canada has a distinct entrepreneurial landscape. Small markets, long distances, rural and coastal communities, and limited access to specialized services shape how people start and sustain businesses. For 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs, these realities intersect with identity, safety, language, and belonging.

Many queer and trans entrepreneurs described feeling invisible in mainstream business ecosystems. Others described having to carefully manage how visible they are, especially in small communities where privacy and safety are concerns. Francophone participants spoke about navigating business systems that are primarily anglophone. Indigenous and Two Spirit participants emphasized the need for culturally grounded approaches that do not replicate colonial structures.

This environmental scan was developed to better understand these realities and to ensure that the Queer Atlantic Business Hub is built in response to community identified needs, rather than assumptions.

How we listened

The environmental scan used a mixed method approach. This environmental scan was made possible through collaboration with trusted, community-rooted partners across Atlantic Canada.

We acknowledge the contributions of Chroma NB, O Strategies, Quadrangle (Newfoundland and Labrador), Pride PEI, Pictou County Partnership, and Tribe Network.

These partners supported outreach, engagement, trust-building, and contextual understanding in their respective regions. Their involvement strengthened the relevance, accessibility, and credibility of the findings.

An online Community Engagement Survey was offered in English and French and received 111 responses.

Who participated in the survey

A total of 111 people completed the Community Engagement Survey. Responses were collected in English and French and represent a range of identities, business stages, and locations across Atlantic Canada.

Province	Approximate number of respondents
Nova Scotia	40
Newfoundland and Labrador	35
New Brunswick	17
Prince Edward Island	12
Other / not specified	7

Respondents included business owners, informal entrepreneurs, freelancers, and people planning to start a business. Many identified with multiple marginalized identities, including disability, rural residency, and francophone identity. Semi structured interviews were conducted virtually with 29 participants across Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Partner led engagement provided additional bilingual and Francophone provincial context in New Brunswick and aggregated data from Newfoundland and Labrador.

What we heard across Atlantic Canada

Lived experience across the region

Participants repeatedly emphasized that entrepreneurship is shaped first and foremost by safety, belonging, and survival, not only by market opportunity or innovation. For many 2SLGBTQIA+ people across Atlantic Canada, self-employment was not a long-term plan, but a response to exclusion, underemployment, or burnout within traditional workplaces. Participants described leaving jobs where they felt unsafe, unsupported, or forced to constantly manage their identities. In this context, entrepreneurship became a way to regain control, stability, and dignity.

Trans and non-binary entrepreneurs described particularly high levels of emotional and administrative labour. Many spoke about the ongoing burden of misgendering, correcting assumptions, and navigating systems that rely on outdated or binary identity markers. This included challenges with business registration, banking, insurance, payroll, and funding applications. Several participants described heightened scrutiny when seeking financing or professional services, along with fears about disclosure, safety, and being perceived as credible. These experiences often required trans entrepreneurs to invest additional time and emotional energy simply to access basic supports.

Francophone and Acadian entrepreneurs across the region described a parallel form of marginalization rooted in language. Participants emphasized that limited

access to French-language business supports affects not only comprehension, but also confidence, trust, and willingness to engage. Many described feeling invisible within both anglophone business ecosystems and predominantly anglophone queer spaces. For some, operating bilingually created additional workload related to branding, marketing, and navigating programs that were technically bilingual but functioned primarily in English.

Racialized, Indigenous, and newcomer entrepreneurs described layered barriers related to access to capital, professional networks, and culturally competent advice. Participants shared that credibility is often unevenly granted, with racialized and newcomer entrepreneurs needing to work harder to be seen as legitimate or investment-ready. Indigenous and Two-Spirit participants emphasized entrepreneurship as a form of cultural reclamation and community care, while also noting that colonial funding and business systems often fail to recognize Indigenous ways of organizing, trading, and leading.

Across provinces, these challenges were intensified in rural and small-town contexts. Limited anonymity, close-knit social networks, and fewer specialized services shaped decisions about visibility, growth, and risk. Several participants described carefully managing how visible they could be in their business, balancing authenticity with safety and economic survival.

Mental health strain was described across all provinces not as an individual failing, but as a predictable outcome of isolation, financial precarity, and lack of affirming support systems. Participants spoke openly about burnout, anxiety, and exhaustion linked to constantly navigating systems that were not designed with them in mind. Many emphasized the need for supports that recognize the human realities of entrepreneurship, not only the technical ones.

Why people choose entrepreneurship

Across Atlantic Canada, entrepreneurship is rarely described as a neutral or purely economic career choice. Many participants spoke about starting businesses to escape workplaces that felt unsafe, rigid, or misaligned with their identities and values. For trans, disabled, and neurodivergent participants in particular, traditional employment was often described as inaccessible or harmful.

Others described entrepreneurship as a way to create what did not exist in their communities. This included queer-affirming services, bilingual or culturally rooted spaces, arts and cultural initiatives, wellness practices, and community-based offerings. For some, entrepreneurship was also a way to remain in their home community rather than relocating to larger cities in search of safety, belonging, or opportunity.

Autonomy and authenticity were central themes across all provinces. Entrepreneurs want control over their work, schedules, and values. They want to build businesses that reflect who they are, without having to compartmentalize identity. In rural and remote areas, entrepreneurship is often one of the only viable pathways to remain rooted while building a livelihood that feels sustainable.

Supports that actually help

Across the region, relationships are the backbone of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of peers, mentors, creative collaborators, and trusted community members. Informal support networks often provided emotional grounding, practical advice, and connections that formal programs could not.

Formal business supports were seen as most effective when they were flexible, low-barrier, and delivered by people who understood queer realities. Many participants described needing someone to help interpret systems, translate jargon, and navigate unwritten rules, rather than simply providing information. Mentorship, particularly when culturally competent and identity-aware, was frequently described as transformative.

Barriers that show up everywhere

Despite regional differences, several barriers appeared consistently across Atlantic Canada. These include mental health strain and burnout, financial literacy and bookkeeping challenges, difficulty accessing funding, gaps in business skills, and isolation. Experiences of bias and exclusion remain common, particularly for trans and non-binary entrepreneurs, racialized participants, and those operating outside urban centres.

Administrative systems that assume binary gender, English-only service delivery, or traditional business models create additional barriers. These systems increase cognitive load, discourage participation, and contribute to uneven access to opportunity across the region.

What makes Atlantic Canada distinct

Geography plays a defining role in shaping entrepreneurial experience. Long distances, weather-related disruptions, and high travel costs limit access to networking, training, and mentorship. Rural entrepreneurs face heightened isolation and safety concerns, along with smaller local markets where reputation and relationships carry significant weight.

Language also plays a critical role. Francophone and bilingual entrepreneurs across Atlantic Canada experience limited access to business supports in French and report feeling marginalized within both business and queer ecosystems. Language access was consistently described as an equity issue, not a preference.

Together, these realities point to the need for an Atlantic-wide approach that is bilingual, relational, and grounded in the lived experiences of diverse queer communities.

What people want from the Hub

Participants consistently identified the need for practical, relationship-based supports that respond to real, day-to-day challenges of running a business. Rather than one-off programs or generic resources, entrepreneurs want ongoing support that helps them navigate systems, make informed decisions, and feel less alone.

Mentorship emerged as a top priority across all provinces. Participants emphasized the value of mentors who understand both business realities and queer lived experience. Many expressed interest in mentorship that is tailored by business stage, sector, language, and identity, including supports for early-stage entrepreneurs, rural business owners, trans and non-binary people, and those navigating multiple forms of marginalization. Peer-to-peer learning and small group mentoring were often described as more accessible and less intimidating than formal advisory models.

Access to funding and grant navigation was also identified as a critical need. Entrepreneurs want clear, centralized information about funding opportunities, along with support in understanding eligibility, preparing applications, and navigating financial systems that can feel opaque or exclusionary. Participants stressed that this kind of navigation support is especially important for people who have limited access to professional networks or prior business experience.

Business skills training remains important, but participants emphasized that training must be practical, accessible, and relevant. Priority topics include bookkeeping, financial literacy, pricing, marketing, legal basics, and administrative requirements. Entrepreneurs expressed a preference for learning that is paced, trauma-informed, and delivered in ways that respect different learning styles and capacities.

Peer connection and community building were repeatedly named as essential. Many participants described isolation as one of the most challenging aspects of entrepreneurship, particularly in rural and small-town contexts. They want spaces to connect with other queer entrepreneurs without having to explain or defend their

identities. Informal, relationship-centred gatherings were often preferred over highly structured networking events.

There is strong interest in a bilingual online directory of queer-owned and queer-led businesses across Atlantic Canada. Participants described a directory as a tool for visibility, collaboration, and economic solidarity. Importantly, many emphasized that participation in such a directory must be optional and designed with safety and consent in mind, recognizing that not all entrepreneurs are able or willing to be publicly visible.

Participants also expressed interest in regional and virtual networking opportunities that reduce travel barriers and support participation across provinces. Hybrid and online options were seen as essential for rural entrepreneurs, disabled participants, and those balancing caregiving or multiple jobs.

Across all of these priorities, participants emphasized that the Hub should be welcoming, flexible, and grounded in lived experience. They want a Hub that listens, adapts, and grows with the community, rather than imposing a fixed model.

Strategic directions emerging from the scan

Bilingual and linguistically inclusive by design. Participants stressed that bilingualism must be embedded in governance, staffing, communications, and programming. Translation alone is not sufficient. Language access is a condition of trust and equity.

Relationship-centred support models. The Hub should prioritize mentorship, peer circles, and community connection over one-off workshops. Participants value ongoing relationships with people who understand their context.

Grounded in Indigenous and decolonized practice. Indigenous and Two-Spirit entrepreneurs emphasized the need for culturally grounded pathways to entrepreneurship. This includes shared leadership, long-term partnerships, and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems.

Designed for rural and dispersed communities. Hybrid delivery, regional pop-ups, and virtual programming are essential. Centralizing services in one city would reproduce existing inequities.

Focused on practical barriers and systems change. Entrepreneurs want help navigating funding, bookkeeping, legal systems, and administration. They also want the Hub to advocate for structural changes in financing, procurement, and policy

environments.

What happens next

The findings from this environmental scan are informing the design, governance, and early programming of the Queer Atlantic Business Hub. They will guide partnership development, funding strategies, and membership engagement.

Community voices will continue to shape the Hub as it grows. The full environmental scan is available upon request.

We invite partners, sponsors, and community members to join us in building a Hub that reflects the realities, strengths, and needs of queer entrepreneurs across Atlantic Canada.