Understanding the realities and addressing the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador

A research brief and high-level gap analysis

Introduction

The following research brief highlights the experiences of entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador. It draws from an environmental scan on the experiences, needs, and priorities of 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs across Atlantic Canada. Specifically, the brief focuses on the motivations and existing sources of support as well as challenges and barriers to accessing support experienced by 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador. In combination with data from the other Atlantic provinces, these findings serve as the foundation for the recommendations for the Queer Atlantic Business Hub outlined in the environmental scan.

In addition, some key considerations around data and information gaps are identified that could inform and improve decision making and the governance, operations, and program design work of the Queer Atlantic Business Hub.

Data sources and sample

The research brief brings together all data sources from the environmental scan, including surveys, interviews, provincial engagement, and regional context.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, Quadrangle led engagement and data collection through a separate queer business research project. A memo of understanding was established to allow the sharing of aggregated, high level data while respecting confidentiality, consent, and community ownership. Findings from Quadrangle's work have been incorporated into this brief at a summary level and contribute to the overall analysis of the Atlantic region.

The following data reflects a breakdown of Quadrangle's sample:

- Businesses surveyed: 2,249
- Businesses identifying as 2SLGBTQIA+: 225 (10% of all businesses)
- Businesses identifying as an ally: 72 (3% of all businesses)
- Businesses NOT a part of our community: 39 (2% of all businesses)

An additional community engagement survey was administered online in English and French and included 35 participants from Newfoundland and Labrador. Survey data provides a quantitative overview of entrepreneurial experiences, barriers, and support

needs, and identifies patterns across provinces. The survey reflects a wide range of business stages, including informal and unregistered businesses, early stage entrepreneurs, and established business owners, as well as a diversity of sectors and identities.

There was some diversity in the demographic details (e.g., ethno-racial identity, sexual orientation, gender identity) of participants across the sample. Due to the research design and size of the sample, the ability to analyze data across different identity categories to examine variations in responses across groups was limited.

A total of twenty nine semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually across Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. These regional findings are integrated into the broader analysis of queer entrepreneurship in Atlantic Canada.

The brief presents themes generated from a focused secondary analysis of the original environmental scan and the provincial report to identify content that was specifically relevant to 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador. It provides a window into some of the distinctive circumstances of those in the province while also connecting to broader themes generated across the region. Sections of the environmental scan that aggregated data are not the focus of this brief, however, the findings discussed are closely aligned with the broader gaps and needs across all four Atlantic provinces.

Geography and demographic context

Newfoundland and Labrador's geography, culture, and unique social dynamics shape queer entrepreneurial experiences in distinctive ways. With a population of approximately 510,000, Newfoundland and Labrador is the most geographically dispersed province in Atlantic Canada. Within the province, mainland Labrador, with a population of around 26,655, is separated from the island of Newfoundland by the narrow Strait of Belle Isle in the southeast, and is bordered to the west and south by the province of Quebec. The majority of the population lives in small, rural, or remote communities, with St. John's functioning as the core urban centre and the primary site of queer community life, arts infrastructure, government services, and business supports.

Geographic, social, and economic isolation is a defining feature of the province's entrepreneurial landscape. Long travel distances, unpredictable weather, and limited transportation options reduce access to training, mentorship, networking, and queer-affirming spaces. In smaller communities, where social networks are tightly knit, queer entrepreneurs often navigate concerns about privacy, social risk, or gossip that may impact both safety and business viability. Survey results suggest that many queer entrepreneurs operate independently and cautiously, prioritizing relationships, trust, and personal safety.

There is a small but significant Francophone population in the province. Of the roughly 3,360 Francophones, half live in the capital region, St. John's, with most of the remaining living on the island's west coast or in Labrador. While the Francophone population has a rich and diverse culture and history across the province, as a group they have faced significant assimilation pressures and, in some regions, major challenges related to declining job industries and economic survival.

In addition to the Francophone population, there are other social, ethnic, racial, and cultural groups within the province. Overall, the province has a significant Indigenous population totalling 9.3% of the overall provincial population and with diverse languages and unique cultures and histories. Generally, there are four main groups living in Newfoundland and Labrador – the Innu, Inuit, Mi'kmaq, and Southern Inuit – and the land is unceded by the original Indigenous nations. The province also represents a small proportion of racialized communities with around 4,545 people identifying as South Asian, 3,590 people identifying as Black, and 2,270 people identifying as Filipino. In addition to the original inhabitants of the land and multi-generational settlers, there are also many newcomers to the province, including recent immigrants from outside of Canada, most of whom are racialized. Almost one-third (30.9%) of the population aged 15 years and older identified as having a disability.

There are additional equity-deserving groups in the province who face systemic exclusion. Economic circumstance plays a significant role in shaping access to choice and opportunity. Queer entrepreneurs who are also members of diverse communities may have unique experiences and needs for support around their businesses. Considering intersectional identities is important for meaningful representation. Focusing on a single dimension of identity can obscure how policies, programs, and cultures may advantage some groups while marginalizing others who sit at multiple intersections. An approach that recognizes these layered experiences is important for avoiding tokenism and designing more equitable decision making and other practices.

Experiences of entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador

Motivations

Across Atlantic Canada, motivations for becoming an entrepreneur are deeply connected to identity and a shared desire to build more representative spaces that enable entrepreneurs to exercise autonomy and act with authenticity.

The data across the region reflects a strong desire for an authentic expression of identity in work, such as through running an explicitly queer business, integrating queer aesthetics and politics into creative work, or simply not having to hide gender or relationship status in professional settings. At the same time, acknowledgment of

diverse visibility needs were reflected in the desire to be able to showcase queer work while also maintaining safety for those not able to be publicly out in all contexts.

Entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador frequently described starting businesses to create safe, meaningful work that reflects their values. Authenticity was a central value, but visibility was also identified as an issue that must be carefully managed. Some entrepreneurs reported avoiding overt queer branding to avoid backlash in conservative or close-knit environments, while others described embracing visibility as an act of community building or artistic expression, especially in the urban centre of St. John's.

In every province across Atlantic Canada, participants conveyed a strong desire for autonomy as motivation for their entrepreneurial journey. Participants described their aspirations to build and maintain workspaces that are queer affirming and distinct from rigid institutional cultures typified in many work environments. Narratives revealed the importance of having the autonomy to choose projects, pace and collaborators and the acknowledgment that entrepreneurship can offer a pathway out of other work environments that are rigid, hierarchical, and hostile to queer and trans people.

Authenticity is another major driver for queer entrepreneurship that appears consistently, though it plays out differently across provinces. In Newfoundland and Labrador, authenticity was framed more cautiously, and participants talked about wanting to be themselves without feeling compelled to constantly explain or justify their identity in close-knit communities. For some, especially in rural and small town contexts, starting a business was described as one of the only viable ways to stay in their home community while building a livelihood that feels even somewhat sustainable.

Representation plays a particularly important role for queer entrepreneurs in cultural, creative, and community based sectors across the Atlantic region. In multiple provinces, participants spoke about wanting younger queer and trans people to "see someone like them" running a business, leading a project, or being visible in their community. Similar motivations are apparent across the provinces, including Newfoundland and Labrador, where several entrepreneurs described using their businesses as community anchors in places where formal queer spaces are scarce.

In Francophone and Acadian settings, this often includes the added layer of linguistic representation: A desire for spaces where French and queerness can coexist without one being sidelined. In Indigenous and Two Spirit contexts, entrepreneurship is also described as an act of cultural reclamation and a way to assert sovereignty over stories, images, and practices that have often been misrepresented or controlled by others.

Taken together, the Atlantic-wide data suggests that entrepreneurship is not just an economic choice for 2SLGBTQIA+ people. It is also a strategy for survival, a vehicle for control over work and authenticity, and an avenue for representing communities that remain underseen in mainstream business landscapes.

Existing supports

Life events often serve as catalysts for entrepreneurship across Atlantic Canada. Coming out, relocating, the loss or closure of a job, a health crisis, or the receipt of a grant or severance package become turning points that make entrepreneurship feel possible or necessary. Mentors, peers, and family members sometimes play a supportive role, encouraging risk taking or offering practical help. For others, the absence of support is what pushes them toward entrepreneurship as a way to create their own conditions for safety, rest, and self-determination.

Notably, more than one-third of survey respondents from Newfoundland and Labrador reported having no access to supports for their business activities, indicating major barriers to accessing resources. Many rely on personal networks, local arts organizations, and community groups for cultural safety and connection. The limited availability of queer-specific business support makes community ties and organizations like Quadrangle particularly significant. Participants described leaning on local queer organizations for connection and safety, and reaching outward to national networks or online communities for business-specific advice. For some, connections formed through activism or community work later became crucial support systems for their entrepreneurial projects.

Across all four provinces, human relationships are the most decisive form of support for queer and trans entrepreneurs. Formal programs play a role, but the survey and interview data show that mentoring relationships, peer networks, and community connections are key sources of support for many. Community support in the form of loyal clients, word of mouth promotion, and local media coverage was identified as important for keeping businesses afloat. This is especially true for arts, cultural, and hospitality businesses, where repeat customers and community events can determine whether a project survives. For some, family and partner support, both emotional and financial, is a vital buffer during periods of transition or risk.

Formal practical supports, such as government programs and loans or grants were also identified as important to participants. Technical and professional support, such as accounting help, legal advice, and sector-specific mentorship, are valued across the region. Participants in technology, innovation, and professional services mentioned targeted programs that helped them gain confidence and clarity. However, access to these supports is uneven, with urban centres and those already connected to institutional networks more likely to benefit. Experiential learning was a recurring thread in every province. Many entrepreneurs bring experience from family businesses, previous roles, or earlier attempts at self employment. These histories provide practical skills and a sense of what is possible, even when formal supports are limited.

Taken together, the data suggest that the queer entrepreneurial ecosystem in Atlantic Canada is held together as much by relationships and informal networks as formal

structures. Where formal supports exist, they are often navigated and made meaningful through those relationships.

Challenges for entrepreneurs and barriers preventing access to supports

2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs identified numerous challenges and barriers for accessing the support that they need, including gaps in the entrepreneurial environment, geographical barriers, discrimination, and mental health challenges.

Across Atlantic Canada, the entrepreneurial ecosystem is fragmented, with queer entrepreneurs often navigating a patchwork of support that varies in accessibility, cultural competence, and relevance. Access to financing was also a central barrier, with participants describing challenges with credit, collateral, guarantors, and eligibility criteria that do not fit small, value-driven, or creative businesses. Younger entrepreneurs, neurodivergent participants, and those with precarious employment histories feel these barriers most acutely.

Some entrepreneurs described feeling disconnected from national or regional entrepreneurial ecosystems, noting that "everything feels far away" including mentorship, training, and collaborative partners. There are very few queer-specific business networks in the region, especially outside major cities. Many existing programs are perceived as not fully inclusive, either because they lack cultural competence, are only in English, or assume a particular business model. Creative and cultural sectors, including drag, music, and visual arts, are especially underserved, with limited access to agents, booking structures, or distribution platforms that understand queer and regional realities.

Geography intensifies these barriers. Travel to workshops or conferences is costly and time consuming. Local economies can be fragile or seasonal, particularly in rural and coastal communities. In rural and remote areas, limited access to banks or in-person financial advice compounds challenges, and some participants from these areas described experiences of isolation and limited local markets.

Across the region, many participants report that institutional actors, including large corporations and mainstream business networks, are not leaders in advancing queer entrepreneurship. Diversity initiatives are often experienced as tokenistic, rather than structurally transformative. This contributes to a sense of isolation or of being only partially welcome in spaces that were not designed for queer and trans entrepreneurs.

Discrimination and bias was described across the region as a frequent occurrence that negatively impacts mental health and well-being. Queer and trans entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador reported encountering discrimination in both subtle and overt forms, including gender bias, heteronormativity, and skepticism in interactions with funders, landlords, suppliers, and institutional partners. In this province, participants described a diffuse sense of risk, linked to worry about gossip, social consequences, or backlash in small communities.

Those who carry multiple marginalized identities, including being racialized, Indigenous, disabled, or from low income backgrounds, described layered forms of exclusion and labelled these dynamics as particularly exhausting. For trans and nonbinary entrepreneurs, administrative systems can be particularly challenging to navigate, and safety concerns influence networking and visibility decisions. At the same time, access to mental health care, social benefits, and stable housing can be challenging and affects entrepreneurial capacity, especially for self-employed and gig workers.

Within this context, needs converge around a more accessible, interconnected, and adequately resourced ecosystem that includes adapted financing, supports for creative industries, safer spaces, peer networks, meaningful inclusion training, and stronger representation of queer entrepreneurs in strategic sectors and decision making spaces.

Francophone 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs

Language and linguistic dynamics add another level of complexity in Francophone contexts that shapes the motivations, opportunities, and constraints of queer entrepreneurs. In Francophone pockets of Newfoundland and Labrador, language and queerness intersect to produce layered invisibility and distance from mainstream business and queer environments.

Access to resources in French is a recurring challenge. Francophone participants described the scarcity of business resources in French, reported limited availability of training, mentorship, and administrative support tailored to their realities, and tensions around language and branding in public-facing businesses.

For some, French and queer visibility can both feel risky, depending on context. Experiences of marginalization from mainstream business (due to queer identity) and queer spaces (due to Francophone identity) affects how comfortable people feel seeking support, how easily they can navigate forms and processes, and whether they feel that their communities and cultural references are understood.

Across Atlantic Canada, Francophone participants express a strong desire for a Hub that is truly bilingual in culture, not only in translation. This involves building governance, engagement, and programming practices that reflect Francophone and Acadian realities, acknowledge the specific pressures of linguistic minority status, and treat language as an equity issue rather than a logistical afterthought.

Preferences for supports and hub activity

Across Atlantic Canada, there is substantial interest in the Queer Atlantic Business Hub as a potential connector, amplifier, and advocate. Across the province, participants described the desire for increased visibility and opportunities for relationship building, access to navigational support and practical resources, including information on

funding, access to suppliers and customers, and training on topics such as marketing and legal skills.

A desire for an advocacy role appeared more prominently in Newfoundland and Labrador than in other provinces, reflecting a need for increased representation for queer entrepreneurs working in this province. Interest tended to focus on the role of the Hub in increasing visibility, connection, and reducing isolation. Entrepreneurs talked about wanting to feel part of a larger Atlantic ecosystem without leaving their communities. A Hub that could offer online support, amplify queer owned businesses, and connect local work to regional and national opportunities is seen as promising, provided it does not overlook the specific constraints of distance, weather, and small local markets.

Participants described wanting safer, non-performative networking spaces where they do not have to code switch or downplay their identities. Practical resources to reduce administrative burden are also high on the list. Across the Atlantic region, both visibility and safety are central goals and queer entrepreneurs want platforms to showcase their work, but also a Hub that supports diverse visibility needs, especially for those not able to be publicly out in all contexts. Respondents emphasized that a Hub must be accessible remotely, respect safety and privacy concerns, and avoid urban-centric design.

Accessibility and equity considerations come up frequently in relation to the Hub. Participants stress the importance of bilingualism, cultural safety for Indigenous, Two Spirit and racialized people, and practices that are explicitly inclusive of trans, non-binary, neurodivergent, disabled, and rural entrepreneurs. Other concerns focus on tone and structure. Some fear that the Hub could become overly institutional, centralize too much in one city, or replicate existing power imbalances. Others worry about expectations of unpaid labour, or about communications that feel narrow, corporate, or overly tied to traditional pride imagery that does not reflect the full diversity of queer communities in Atlantic Canada.

At the same time, many participants see the Hub as a chance to build bridges between local organizations and national actors such as Pride at Work, CQCC, QueerTech, and Start Proud. A structure that can connect local, regional, and national levels, share information, and advocate for queer entrepreneurs with funders and governments is widely seen as valuable. Overall, queer entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador are seeking a Hub that is regionally grounded with attention to language, rural realities and political context, and oriented toward practical, relational support. They want a place where they can recognize themselves, learn together, and access opportunities.

Knowledge gaps and pathways forward to support decision making and future work at the Hub

The observations and insights outlined in this brief are informed by data collected from across Atlantic Canada that specifically addresses 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador. The brief describes the experiences of queer entrepreneurs, their motivations, the supports that they access, their challenges and barriers preventing access to entrepreneurial support, as well as preferences for support from the Queer Atlantic Business Hub. The following section outlines some high-level actions for how the Hub could contribute to decision making around designing and implementing programming.

Across the Atlantic region, the research activities from the environmental scan could be further strengthened by additional, focused research on variations in experiences, needs, and preferences of 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs across the province. The interviews and survey participants represented a range of diversity beyond 2SLGBTQIA+ identity, however, there are gaps in understanding how intersecting identities and contexts – including Indigenous, Francophone and ethno-racial identities, rural or remote dwellers, and those who identify as dis/abled, trans or non-binary – play out in some of the detailed descriptions. The data gathered points to differences across demographic groups and indicates that more work is needed to better understand inequities within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, to ultimately increase access for those with limited formal/institutional and informal resources.

As well, the data suggests that there is a need to further consider what cultural safety and inclusion looks like for other groups in order to better support Indigenous and Two Spirit people, racialized, trans, non-binary, neurodivergent, disabled, and rural entrepreneurs. Participants emphasize the need for decolonial approaches within the Hub's work and future work with Indigenous communities would provide greater detail about what this could look like in specific locations across Newfoundland and Labrador and the region.

Processes are needed that ensure diverse representation and inclusion across all aspects of hub activities, including governance models, operations and program design. Collaboration with other community groups and organizations serving equity-deserving groups with and without established roots in entrepreneurship may also increase connection to those cut off from the organized 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneur community.

Possible tensions show up in diverse motivations and support needs. Ongoing deliberation about the needs of different groups within the community, and clear, transparent processes for developing priorities for programming and events could start to address differences. The desire to choose how, and the extent to which, queer identity shows up in one's business, was identified as an issue by entrepreneurs in Newfoundland and Labrador, particularly in small knit communities. Addressing differences in visibility needs could involve thinking about how programs can be a

combination of inward- or outward-facing initiatives, to ensure that people have autonomy within the hub network and balance the desire for visibility with concerns around safety.

Participants from Newfoundland and Labrador identified the importance of a regional body that advocates for better representation of queer entrepreneurs in Atlantic Canada. Future work at the hub could consider how best to advance the interests of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, including preferences for specific types of advocacy work. Collaboration with other community groups and organizations may be fruitful in this pursuit.

The support and hub activities prioritized by participants did not always align directly with the challenges they identified. As a result, it was not always clear how some preferred options would address specific issues they experience. Entrepreneurs expressed a mix of interest in relational aspects of entrepreneurship and in technical or professional resources, which may not equally directly address challenges such as discrimination or mental health, for example, though indirect benefits are possible. This underscores the importance of clearly defining objectives and expected outcomes so that both measurable and qualitative impacts and progress can be assessed.

Furthermore, the survey data revealed a greater number of queer participants in Newfoundland and Labrador, than other provinces, reporting having no support relevant to their entrepreneurial pursuits. This highlights likely inequities in availability of resources and support across geographies and provinces, and raises questions around how to mediate or address these in the programming, planning, and governance of the Hub.

Numerous challenges and preferences have been identified across Newfoundland and Labrador. Moving forward, gaps could be addressed using a number of broad approaches. Future research could focus on increasing knowledge of the different experiences, needs, and preferences of diverse groups within 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneur community across the Atlantic region, including key details like phase of business development, sector-specific information, as well as identifying strategies that align with regional resource gaps and availability. As well, such work could feed into planning around logistics, like the location of events and different modes of access (e.g., virtual/online, accessibility options) to Hub programs. This information could inform hub activities, decision making, and future planning, such as specific events, programming and directions for growth, and should be guided by an equity lens to identify priorities, gaps, and progress.