

Understanding the realities and addressing the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ Entrepreneurs in Nova Scotia

A research brief and high-level gap analysis

Introduction

The following research brief highlights the experiences of entrepreneurs in Nova Scotia. 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, existing sources of support as well as challenges and barriers to accessing support experienced by 2SLGBTQIA+ Nova Scotian entrepreneurs. In combination with data from the other Atlantic provinces, these findings serve as a 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.

Survey data included 40 Nova Scotian participants and qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 entrepreneurs located around the province. Both survey and interview samples reflect 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 diversity in the sexual orientation and gender identity as well as ethno-racial identity and other factors (e.g., dis/ability) 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.

The brief presents themes generated from a focused secondary analysis of the original environmental scan material to identify content that was specifically relevant to 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs in the province of Nova Scotia. It provides a window into some of the distinctive circumstances of Nova Scotians 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 in this brief are closely aligned with the broader gaps and needs across all four Atlantic provinces.

Like the environmental scan, the themes that follow form the foundation for the Hub's strategic direction and highlight some conditions and pathways toward achieving a more equitable and connected entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Geography and demographic context

There is rich geography and demographic diversity in the Nova Scotian population across rural and urban locations that should be considered in terms of representation and inclusion when considering needs and how to support queer entrepreneurship.

Nova Scotia, with a population of approximately one million people, is the most populous province in Atlantic Canada and home to the region's largest urban centre, Halifax. Halifax functions as the province's urban cultural, economic, and institutional nucleus, hosting the majority of queer organizations, Pride festivals, arts infrastructure, and entrepreneurial support.

Much of the province also consists of rural, coastal, or small-town communities where queer visibility is limited, and residents often navigate complex social dynamics, local politics, and longstanding community histories.

Nova Scotia additionally has a small but significant Francophone and Acadian population concentrated in regions such as Clare, Argyle, Richmond County, and parts of Cape Breton. While French-language supports exist, they are not consistently accessible across entrepreneurship programs.

There are numerous other social, ethnic, racial and cultural groups within the province. The data reflects some experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs who are also part of the dis/ability community. Nova Scotia is also home to a large African Nova Scotian community, the oldest and largest Indigenous Black population in Canada, as well as a large Mi'kmaq population, who are indigenous to the unceded ancestral land of Mi'kma'ki, and live in communities across the province on the mainland, and Cape Breton Island, as well as in urban areas. In addition to the original inhabitants of the land and multi-generational settlers, there are also many newcomers to the province, including immigrants from outside of Canada, the vast majority of whom are racialized.

There are many 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 Nova Scotia:

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 from Nova Scotia reflects a strong desire for an authentic expression of identity in queer business, 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.

Participants described their desire 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.

Mental health and wellness were also key themes, as participants from Nova Scotia described building community-based initiatives, queer-centred wellness practices, peer-led mental health offerings, and safer creative spaces. These types of initiatives also reflect the importance of community in the motivations of members of the queer community to pursuing entrepreneurship.

For some participants, especially in rural and small town contexts, starting a business was described as a way to stay in their home community while building a livelihood. In Francophone and Acadian settings, this often included the added layer of linguistic representation and a desire for spaces where Francophone identity and queerness can coexist. Some participants described entrepreneurship in Indigenous and Two Spirit contexts 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 suggest that entrepreneurship is not just an economic choice for 2SLGBTQIA+ people, it is also a strategy for survival, a vehicle for authenticity, and an avenue for representing communities that remain underseen in mainstream business landscapes.

Existing support

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.

Entrepreneurs described drawing from a mix of formal and informal support. Participants in Halifax described drawing from a variety of sources, including mainstream small business centres, arts councils, and sector specific programs, while also relying heavily on relationships with others through peer networks, creative communities, and informal mentorship from older queer and trans leaders.

Several participants emphasized that formal support often feels urban-centric, White-dominant, or culturally distant from queer lived realities. Many rely primarily on peer networks, creative communities, or relationships built through activism, arts spaces, and social circles.

Outside Halifax, where formal support is less available, relationships with other small business owners, allies, and community organizers become even more important for activities like information gathering and interpretation and unveiling opportunities. Particularly for those working in the arts and culture sector or in hospitality, community support was described in terms of connections with loyal clients and publicity through media and other avenues. Data suggests that supportive networks were vital as ongoing resources and to navigate formal sources of support, but were especially crucial during times of precarity or risk taking in entrepreneurial efforts.

In addition to relationship building, connection to technical and professional supports, such as accounting help, legal advice, and sector specific mentorship, was also highly valued across the region, although access to these supports is uneven, with urban centres and those already connected to institutional networks more likely to benefit.

Challenges for entrepreneurs and barriers preventing access to support

2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs identified numerous challenges and barriers for accessing the support they need, including gaps in the entrepreneurial environment, discrimination, mental health challenges, financial and accounting supports, issues around visibility and gaps in business skills or experience. Across Atlantic Canada, the entrepreneurial ecosystem is fragmented, with queer entrepreneurs often navigating a patchwork of services that vary widely in accessibility, cultural competence, and relevance.

Gaps in resources for 2SLGBTQIA+ businesses are evident across the region. There are very few queer specific business networks, 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.

Entrepreneurs outside Halifax noted difficulty accessing sector-specific supports, mentorship, or queer-affirming spaces. Especially in smaller communities, queer spaces and presence were identified as uncommon. Isolation, travel costs, weather-related barriers, and limited local markets are major constraints and shape business sustainability in rural Nova Scotia in regions like Cape Breton, the Annapolis Valley, South Shore, and rural HRM.

Across the region, many participants report that institutional actors, including large corporations and mainstream business networks, are not seen as leaders in advancing queer entrepreneurship. Diversity initiatives are often experienced as superficial or tokenistic, rather than structurally transformative. This contributes to a sense of isolation, including the need to isolate from the mainstream, and marginalization in spaces that were not designed with queer and trans entrepreneurs in mind.

Access to financing is a central barrier everywhere. Participants describe challenges with credit, collateral, guarantors, and eligibility criteria that do not fit small, values-driven, or creative businesses. Younger entrepreneurs, neurodivergent participants, and those with precarious employment histories feel these barriers most acutely. In rural and remote areas, limited access to banks or in person financial advice compounds the challenge.

Discrimination is a significant barrier that queer and trans entrepreneurs in Nova Scotia described frequently encountering. This can take many subtle and overt forms including gender bias, heteronormativity, skepticism, exclusion, tokenism and bias in interactions with funders, landlords, suppliers, and institutional partners. These experiences shape decisions about visibility, business branding, and engagement in professional networks. 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.

In Nova Scotia, especially in Halifax, some participants note a gap between the province's progressive image and the reality of performative rather than systemic inclusion and equity. Trans and nonbinary entrepreneurs reported particular challenges in systems that assume binary gender, require repeated explanation, or rely on outdated ID requirements.

Burnout and mental health strain reflect both entrepreneurial realities and the emotional labour of navigating identity in professional settings. Access to mental health care, social benefits, and stable housing also affect entrepreneurial capacity, especially for self-employed and gig workers.

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 and Acadian communities in Nova Scotia, 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.

Preferences for support and hub activity

Nova Scotia respondents expressed strong interest in the Queer Atlantic Business Hub as a potential connector, as well as an amplifier and advocate. Both visibility and safety are central goals and data showed 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.

In Nova Scotia, participants often imagine the Hub as a bridge between local and Atlantic networks and national organizations, as well as a way to connect Halifax-based resources with smaller communities in Cape Breton, the Valley, South Shore, and beyond. There was a range of potential involvement activities described by participant entrepreneurs, including roles as mentors, providing workshops, contributing to governance and basic membership.

Across all provinces, visibility and representation are central needs. Participants want platforms to showcase queer talent in arts, tech, services, and community based work. Many highlight the importance of safer, non-performative networking spaces where they do not have to code switch or downplay their identities.

Francophone participants expressed a strong desire for a Hub that is truly bilingual in culture, not only in translation. This extends to governance structure, 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.

Accessibility and equity considerations come up frequently in relation to the Hub. Participants stress the importance of bilingualism, cultural safety for Indigenous and Two Spirit people, and practices that are explicitly inclusive of trans, non-binary, neurodivergent, disabled, and rural entrepreneurs. There is a desire for an organization that considers equity and barriers to access to participation in the design and delivery of programs and resources.

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. Practical resources to reduce administrative burden and decision fatigue are also high on the list.

Overall, entrepreneurs are seeking a Hub that is inclusive, bilingual, regionally grounded, and oriented toward practical, relational support. They want a place where they can recognize themselves, learn together, and access opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach.

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 address 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs in Nova Scotia. 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.

In particular, 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 intersectionality, including ethno-racial identities, those who identify as dis/abled, in addition to trans and non-binary, plays 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.

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 province, including key details like phase of business development and sector-specific information may inform hub activities. This information could inform future planning, such as specific events, programming and directions for growth.

Processes are needed that ensure diverse representation and inclusion across all aspects of hub activities, including governance models, operations, and program design. Furthermore, collaboration with other community groups and organizations serving equity-deserving groups with and without established roots in entrepreneurship may heighten possible connections to groups disconnected from the organized 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneur community.

Possible tensions show up in diverse motivations and support needs. Ongoing deliberation about how to meet the needs of different groups within the community, and clear, transparent processes for developing priorities for programming and events could start to address differences in needs. For example, this could involve thinking about how programs might be a combination of inward- or outward-facing initiatives, to ensure that people have autonomy and choice within the hub network and balance both the desire for visibility with concerns around safety.

The preferences voiced for supports and hub activities did not always map directly onto the broad range of challenges faced. Thus, it is not always obvious how some of the options identified by participants will positively impact them in terms of the challenges that they experience. For example, some of the strong preferences for technical and professional resources identified by entrepreneurs may not directly impact challenges around discrimination or mental health, although indirect benefits are possible. This is to be expected and points to the need to clearly scope the objectives and expected outcomes of activities and planning in order to be able to calculate impacts, both measurable and qualitative.

There are numerous challenges and preferences described across Nova Scotia. A structured needs assessment of where supports exist and where there are gaps, for the purpose of identifying strategies for filling gaps could be helpful in decision-making and planning. Examples include clearly delineating needs according to different stages of business development and identifying strategies according to resource gaps and availability in different regions. Ideally this work would also use an equity lens to identify priorities and gaps. This work could be initiated with a survey conducted across the hub membership and other entrepreneurs.

The data suggests that there is also a need for further consideration of what cultural safety and inclusion looks like in the context of supporting Indigenous and Two Spirit people, trans, non-binary, neurodivergent, disabled, and rural entrepreneurs. In particular, 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 Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada.

This initiative is made possible thanks to funding from CQCC's 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, with backing from the Government of Canada. Cette initiative est rendue possible grâce au financement du Carrefour du savoir pour l'entrepreneuriat 2ELGBTQI+ du CCQC, avec le soutien du gouvernement du Canada.