

BARRIER BREAKERS

2SLGBTQI+ VISIONARIES ARE RESHAPING CANADA'S BUSINESS LANDSCAPE



SAYING GOODBYE TO DEI

Embracing Human Rights to
Retain Full Participation and
Dignity in the Workplace

BUILDING A RESILIENT SUPPLY CHAIN

Why Inclusion Makes
Good Business Sense

QUEER FIT CLUB BLENDS SWEAT WITH SOLIDARITY

Building Safe Spaces for
the Queer Community



COMMUNITY. COMMITMENT. PRIDE.

At Cassels, we are committed to fostering a strong culture of inclusivity and diversity to create an environment that reflects both our clients and the communities in which we work and live. We believe that forging authentic connections in the communities in which we work and live ensures that our contributions make a meaningful difference.

Your success is our priority.

COMMUNITY. COMMITMENT. PRIDE.

Culture From Within

Fostering Inclusivity and Diversity

We believe that the success of our firm is built on the unique skills, perspectives, experiences, and values of each individual.

We are committed to fostering a strong culture of inclusivity and diversity to create an environment that reflects both our clients and the communities in which we work and live. We believe in giving back to our communities and recognize that our combined efforts can have a truly significant impact.

Change From Within

Reflecting on an Inclusive Workplace

Our Inclusion & Diversity Committee (IDC) was established in 2013 to support and promote the firm's commitment to advancing diversity within the firm, with our clients, and in the community as a whole. Since its inception, the IDC has been actively involved in a variety of inclusion and diversity-focused events, partnerships, and organizations and has now supported the development and implementation of 10+ Affinity Groups.

The IDC also shares best practices with the other 25+ local and national firms who are members of the Law Firm Diversity and Inclusion Network and attends joint events with the Legal Leaders for Diversity — a group of 90+ general counsel at leading Canadian companies who are committed to inclusion and diversity.

In This Together

Forging Authentic Connections

We are committed to supporting organizations that improve people's lives — through education, improvement of health outcomes, and community development.

Through our Corporate Responsibility Committee, we embody this community-minded spirit at a firm level and invest in both organizations and relationships. This approach to forging authentic connections in the communities in which we work and live ensures that our contributions make a meaningful difference.

Power of Pro Bono

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We believe that we have a responsibility to assist disadvantaged and marginalized people, as well as the charitable organizations working on their behalf, in seeking legal services that could otherwise remain out of reach.

Our associates and partners are encouraged to pursue worthwhile causes and donate their time and expertise to pro bono activities, and we are extremely proud of the passion, commitment, and hard work demonstrated in their pro bono efforts.

Cassels

cassels.com/community



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QUEERTECH

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WHAT DOOR CAN YOU HOLD OPEN?

For a business owner, Pride Month means celebrating while calculating risk, being visible while remaining viable. It's a balancing act of authenticity and strategy, optimism and realism. And in 2025, that tension feels sharper than ever.

That delicate balance is exactly why QBiz exists and why I'm honoured to step into this role as editor-in-chief. I come to this position as an educator, past contributor and marketer who believes in the power of clear values and honest storytelling. My commitment is to amplify the voices of companies, entrepreneurs, connectors, emerging leaders and changemakers who are navigating this same terrain.

I want our stories to inspire, yes, but also offer real, tangible takeaways. In a world moving this fast, every story needs to serve a purpose. Our content should inform, equip and challenge us to act.

Every day, 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs face impossible choices: reveal their identity and risk losing

business or stay hidden and lose themselves. The numbers bear this reality out. According to a national study by CGLCC and Deloitte, nearly half of 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs report difficulty accessing funding. A third struggle to find mentorship. One in four says they've lost business because of their identity.

Behind each statistic is a real person making difficult calculations about visibility, safety and success.

Many of us carry an unspoken responsibility. As queer and trans professionals and business owners, we're often expected to represent something bigger than ourselves. We're asked to be the first, to be the example, to hold the door open for others, all while navigating systems that haven't always made room for us.

That's why initiatives like Rainbow Connect and CGLCC's Diverse Supplier Network matter so much. They help companies walk the talk by hiring inclusively, sourcing from certified diverse suppliers and making procurement decisions that reflect real values. Because how we spend, who we invest in and who we choose to build with can either reinforce barriers or tear them down.

This issue of QBiz celebrates the barrier breakers.

Leaders like Bobbie Racette, who built a thriving tech company after being told "no" 170 times, thus proving that persistence paired with purpose can overcome even systemic rejection.

Darrell Schuurman, who has reshaped how Canada understands inclusive economic opportunity, showing us what policy change looks like in practice. Elsewhere in the magazine, we profile Michael Betteridge, whose work is changing what safe, affirming spaces look like in the fitness industry, creating blueprints others can follow.

We're also shining a light on the quiet leaders. The ones who aren't getting awards yet, but who continue to show up, rewriting policies, mentoring peers, advocating behind the scenes. Their work is equally essential. Their impact is lasting.

At QBiz, we believe this publication should be more than a place for recognition. It should be a connector. A tool. A source of ideas and action. A reflection of our values and our future.

The work isn't done. But progress is being made, one authentic story at a time. After you read these profiles, ask yourself: What barrier can I break? What door can I hold open? What system can I help change?

That's how pride becomes power. That's how visibility becomes victory.

Yours in pride and purpose,

Hannah



BARRIER BREAKERS

2SLGBTQI+ Visionaries Are Reshaping Canada's Business Landscape

By Hannah Pratt



Breaking barriers isn't just about overcoming obstacles – it's about dismantling systems that create those obstacles for everyone who comes after. From coast to coast, 2SLGBTQI+ changemakers are building organizations, programs and communities that create both opportunity and belonging.

These changemakers come in many forms: established CEOs transforming corporate culture, young leaders launching

innovative startups, volunteers creating grassroots community programs and companies taking bold public stands. They represent more than individual success stories; they embody a fundamental shift in how Canadian society approaches inclusion, innovation and impact across sectors from economic development to arts, fitness and community advocacy. Their work proves that when you centre the experiences of marginalized communities, you create stronger, more resilient solutions for everyone.

BOBBIE RACETTE: WHEN 'NO' BECOMES FUEL

By the time Bobbie Racette encountered rejection No. 170 from potential investors, she had learned something that would reshape her understanding of entrepreneurship entirely: the system wasn't broken – it was functioning exactly as designed. It simply wasn't designed for someone like her.

As a Métis-Cree, 2SLGBTQI+ woman in technology, Racette embodied intersections that traditional venture capital found deeply uncomfortable. Each rejection revealed not her inadequacy as an entrepreneur, but the inadequacy of systems that prioritized familiar patterns over transformative potential.

"I founded Virtual Gurus with \$300 to my name and at the time needed to borrow money from my parents just to make rent," Racette told Women of Influence in 2023. "It was a very scary yet humbling experience to pull myself through that."

That \$300 seed would generate \$300,000 in revenue during year 1. Today, Virtual Gurus operates as a leading Talentplace platform across North America, connecting businesses with skilled remote virtual assistants through sophisticated matchmaking algorithms that prioritize both capability and cultural fit.

Racette's approach has proven financially sound. McKinsey & Company research shows that companies with a diverse workforce are 35 per cent more likely to experience greater financial returns than their respective non-diverse counterparts.

Racette's revolutionary impact extends far beyond personal financial success. The majority of Virtual Gurus' virtual assistants come from historically underrepresented communities, transforming her platform into an engine for economic inclusion that operates at scale. The approach combines business strategy with social impact.

"Tons of clients are leaving some of the bigger players specifically to work with companies that share their values around diversity and inclusion," Racette told BetaKit when Virtual Gurus closed its \$8.4-million funding round in 2022.

This values alignment has fuelled exponential growth, earning Virtual Gurus the *Globe and Mail's* recognition as one of Canada's Top Growing Companies. The success has proven that representation creates both possibility and profitability.

Racette's leadership philosophy reflects her commitment to systematic transformation. Despite lacking formal management training, she enrolled in Harvard University leadership courses,



determined to become the leader her business and expanding team required.

"Leadership is super difficult when you've never really learned," she told *Entrepreneur* magazine in 2024.

The recognition has been both extensive and meaningful. Racette earned Indigenous Entrepreneur of the Year in 2022, EY Entrepreneur of the Year 2023 for the Prairies Region and Distinguished Entrepreneur of the Year 2023 from the University of Victoria's Gustavson School of Business. Her board positions include the Telus Friendly Future Foundation and chair of the Indigenous Prosperity Foundation.

Most recently, QueerTech appointed Racette as chair of their board of directors in January 2025, positioning her to guide the Montreal-based non-profit's mission to support 2SLGBTQI+ tech workers and entrepreneurs through initiatives like their groundbreaking QT Founders Qatalyst accelerator.

By succeeding visibly as an Indigenous, queer woman in technology, Racette has accomplished something more valuable than building a profitable company – she has expanded the realm of possibility for others who share similar identities and confront similar systemic barriers.

Her fundamental message resonates beyond entrepreneurship: persistence paired with purpose can overcome even the most entrenched exclusion, but only if that persistence is directed toward systematic change rather than individual accommodation.

DARRELL SCHUURMAN: A CALL TO CANADIANS

As co-founder and CEO of Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC), Darrell Schuurman has orchestrated one of the most significant transformations in Canadian business advocacy. What began as a networking organization in 2003 has evolved into the country's official certifying body for 2SLGBTQI+-owned businesses and a driving force behind inclusive procurement policies that reach into corporate boardrooms nationwide.

His recent Pride 2025 message captures both the challenges and opportunities he sees across the country. "Across Canada, queer entrepreneurs are doing what they've always done: adapting, leading and building stronger communities," Schuurman said in CGLCC's video message released this month. "At CGLCC, we witness it every day."

But Schuurman doesn't minimize the obstacles. Queer and trans business owners continue launching companies, hiring teams and driving innovation "while still navigating unique barriers: limited access to capital and exclusion from supplier networks, all of this while facing growing global political and social pushback."

A CGLCC and Deloitte study revealed that 20 per cent of respondents experienced challenges scaling their business as a result of being part of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, citing barriers such as access to mentorship, financing and global trade. More than one in three people reported they intentionally withheld their 2SLGBTQI+ identity for fear of discrimination and one in four said they lost opportunities due to their identity.

The metrics reveal the scope of this quiet revolution despite these challenges. CGLCC now empowers and connects thousands of businesses while fostering unprecedented diversity and growth within the 2SLGBTQI+ business community. Their recent announcement of \$2.8 million in second-round Ecosystem Fund support, specifically targeting under-served regions and communities, demonstrates how grassroots advocacy can scale into policy-level impact.

"And yet, despite it all, queer and trans owned businesses continue to build momentum," Schuurman noted in his Pride message, highlighting founders who "transform barriers into breakthroughs" and "businesses reimagining what's possible with fresh ideas and bold vision."

The economic case for inclusion is clear. "Including 2SLGBTQI+ businesses in the supply chain drives economic growth for Canada while exclusionary practices limit economic growth – simple as that," Schuurman wrote in a recent op-ed for *The Future Economy*.

"Diverse teams outperform. Inclusive businesses are more resilient," says Schuurman. "We know that innovation thrives when we bring together people with different experiences, ideas and worldviews ... we need to run toward DEI, not away from it."

CGLCC's comprehensive approach includes mentorship networks that connect emerging entrepreneurs with established



business leaders, leadership development programs that build capacity within underrepresented communities and advocacy work that addresses systemic policy gaps affecting 2SLGBTQI+ business owners.

Their supplier diversity certification program has fundamentally altered procurement landscapes, opening doors for hundreds of 2SLGBTQI+-owned businesses to access corporate contracts that were previously inaccessible, not due to lack of capability, but due to lack of visibility and systematic exclusion.

His call to action extends beyond celebration to concrete support. "If you're a consumer, shop queer and shop Canadian. If you're a business, build relationships with queer and trans entrepreneurs. If you're in leadership, engage queer suppliers and invest in inclusive economic growth," he urged in his Pride message. "Because when queer entrepreneurs succeed, our economy and our communities thrive year-round."

RUBY CHOPSTIX: A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Looking back, the prophecy was almost poetic in its precision.

Years before Ruby Chopstix would take the stage, the artist now known by that name was Alex Nguyen, a university student collaborating with best friend Jolene Ground Beef on a documentary exploring drag culture. Their interviews included the late Joan Costalotsa, a beloved figure in Winnipeg's drag community. During that conversation, Joan studied Alex intently before making a prediction that seemed almost casual: she would excel in drag performance.

"It feels like a self-prophecy from documenting other people's drag journey to having my own documentary," Ruby reflects now. "The world works in mysterious ways but this was always meant to happen."

That prophecy has materialized in extraordinary fashion. Ruby became Canada's first drag artist-in-residence at the Rainbow Resource Centre and the subject of *Becoming Ruby*, which captured Best Short Documentary at FascinAsian Film Festival Winnipeg 2025.

"It was a very surreal moment to be crowned the very first one, not only at Rainbow Resource Centre but all of Canada," Ruby, who also goes by Alex Nguyen, reflects about her historic appointment. "Throughout the year, I felt an immense pressure to create something that would be of the calibre of the title and the expectations of others."

That pressure catalyzed The Velvet Rope, Ruby's all-BIPOC showcase that became one of her most significant accomplishments. "When that event happened, that was one of the proudest moments from bringing everybody together, having a dance number and bringing my mom on stage," she recalls. "I didn't think I would ever top that until I had my Winnipeg premiere of *Becoming Ruby*."

The documentary premiere, strategically held during Asian Heritage Month in May, became profoundly



emotional for Ruby. "I would be lying if I didn't say I was a little scared to show all my friends and family *Becoming Ruby*," she admits. Having worked primarily behind cameras on film productions, being the documentary subject felt both vulnerable and therapeutic.

"During that screening, I was crying literally before the show even started. My best friends were there and gave me flowers and that's when the tears started flowing," Ruby remembers. "All of us in the space now have a connection that won't be replicated anywhere else."

Ruby's understanding of the documentary's purpose has evolved significantly. "I had really thought that this project deep down was for my younger queer self. The person who truly had nobody to really look up to, nobody to be inspired by. I was that role model now," she explains. "But really this documentary isn't for me and never really was. It's for all those other younger queer people and families who have queer children."

The film serves multiple critical audiences: "It's for the ones who need to have conversations but don't know how to communicate. It's for those who are

parents that want to support but don't know how. And it's for those who need a small little happy story of what life can be like with your family and friends."

Ruby consistently acknowledges the foundation others created for her success. "While it may seem like the first of things, I'm not. I'm building upon the foundations that others like Anita Stallion, Vida Lamour, Prairie Sky, Joan Costalotsa, to name a few, have done," she emphasizes. "I appreciate all of those people because I wouldn't be able to do what I do now without them."

The residency year proved transformative yet challenging. "Overall, the residency was difficult, confusing, scary, but ultimately it was so rewarding. It gave me that necessary push to see what I can do as a drag performer, how I can help serve my community and give back to the ones that helped me be where I am today."

Ruby envisions lasting institutional change. "I hope for the program to stay forever and for the other cities to create something similar. We, as drag artists, are so powerful in everything we do! People say the sky is the limit, but for drag artists, we go above and beyond that."

ALLIES IN ACTION

Organizations Making a Difference

While individual leaders drive change, some organizations are dismantling barriers through bold action and authentic commitment to 2SLGBTQI+ communities.

The Johnston Group

This Winnipeg-based employee benefits company demonstrates that authentic inclusion requires dedicated investment. Beyond hosting two sold-out drag brunches during Pride 2025 and serving as an official sponsor of the Pride Winnipeg Festival, the Johnston Group has made systematic commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion. The company appointed Jaime Chinchilla as their first full-time DEI advisor, formalizing efforts that were previously managed by committee.

"The company made a commitment to become even more inclusive by dedicating a full-time resource to diversity and inclusion," says Chinchilla. The Johnston Group has established employee resource groups, safe spaces for discussing cultural issues and channels for addressing discrimination concerns. Their community impact extends far beyond Pride events. The company supports over 100 community organizations, matches United Way donations and encourages employee volunteerism. Even their office design reflects community commitment, with boardrooms named after and designed by local organizations like United Way and Habitat for Humanity. Chief operating officer Jennifer Bjarnarson notes the company's "very inclusive, collaborative and community-oriented culture," which includes initiatives like Diwali celebrations, truth and reconciliation presentations and two additional paid leave days for female employees to address women's health needs. Their visible support demonstrates how businesses can move beyond corporate statements to become active community partners through both celebration and systematic organizational change.

Canadian Museum for Human Rights

The museum is bringing critical 2SLGBTQI+ history to international audiences through "Love in a Dangerous Time: Canada's LGBT Purge," a pop-up exhibition at the Embassy of Canada Art Gallery in Washington, D.C., coinciding with WorldPride. The exhibition documents the harassment and firing of 2SLGBTQI+ members of the Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Mounted Police and federal public service workers from the 1950s to 1990s. Developed in partnership with the LGBT Purge Fund, the exhibition sheds light on this painful chapter of Canada's history while celebrating the courage and resilience of those who fought for justice. "This exhibition shines a light on the baseless and tragic pursuit of 2SLGBTQI+ people who sought to serve their country," said Michelle Douglas, survivor and executive director of the LGBT Purge Fund. As *Winnipeg Free Press* columnist Dan Lett noted, taking this exhibit to Washington – "ground zero in an aggressive anti-LGBTQ+ campaign by the Trump administration" – represents "a pretty courageous act by Ottawa." The museum's commitment to sharing difficult truths demonstrates how cultural institutions can advance understanding and prevent history from repeating itself.

Northern Mosaic Network

In Yellowknife, a city of just 20,000 people in the Northwest Territories, Northern Mosaic Network addresses the unique challenges of supporting 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs in remote regions. Selected as a recipient of CGLCC's Ecosystem Fund, the organization is developing comprehensive support systems including training courses, mentorship programs with successful business owners and seminars featuring expert speakers. Most notably, they're establishing a queer market space – a consistent venue for 2SLGBTQI+ business owners to sell products and services. "We want to give people the opportunity to receive support through the entire process in a structured time frame, provide them with support of people who already own businesses and then give them the safety net to try out whatever it is that they want to try in a designated location," said Chelsea Thacker, executive director of Northern Mosaic Network. With commercial real estate expensive in Yellowknife, the market space provides crucial accessible opportunities for 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs to test and grow their businesses in a supportive environment.

These organizations prove that barrier breaking requires institutional commitment and community partnership to create lasting change across diverse geographic and cultural contexts.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT: IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

While stories share what's possible, the data reaffirm the systemic economic impact of inclusive practices across Canadian businesses.

FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

McKinsey & Company research demonstrates that companies with

diverse workforces are 35 per cent more likely to experience greater financial returns than their non-diverse counterparts. The firm's 2023 study of 1,265 companies across 23 countries found that companies in the top quartile of board-gender diversity are 27 per cent more likely than those in the bottom quartile to outperform financially. Companies with ethnically diverse

boards are 13 per cent more likely to outperform than those in the bottom quartile.

Boston Consulting Group research reveals even more dramatic innovation benefits. Companies with diverse management teams report innovation revenue 19 percentage points higher than companies with below average leadership diversity. These organizations also

achieve EBIT margins nine percentage points higher than companies with below average diversity on their management teams.

A separate BCG study found that firms with the most diverse workforces attributed 45 per cent of their revenue to innovation, compared to just 26 per cent for the least diverse firms.

THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

The economic opportunity in Canada is substantial. The World Economic Forum estimates that closing the gender gap alone would add \$28 trillion to the global economy by 2025 – a 26 per cent increase. For Canada specifically, advancing women's equality could add \$4.5 trillion to the collective annual GDP across Asia Pacific countries, where Canada maintains significant trade relationships.

However, systemic barriers persist. A CGLCC and Deloitte study revealed that 20 per cent of 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs experienced challenges scaling their business as a result of being part of the community, citing barriers such as access to mentorship, financing and global trade. More than one in three people reported they intentionally withheld their 2SLGBTQI+ identity for fear of discrimination and one in four said they lost opportunities due to their identity.

THE URGENCY FACTOR

The social context makes inclusive business practices even more critical. Statistics Canada reported that hate crimes against 2SLGBTQI+ people increased 70 per cent in 2023 even as overall violent crime decreased. Since 2016, hate crimes targeting sexual orientation have increased by nearly 400 per cent. In the United States, the 2023 National Crime Victimization Survey found that 2SLGBTQI+ people were five times more likely to be victims of violence than non-2SLGBTQI+ people and nine times more likely to be victims of hate crimes.

BEYOND COMPLIANCE

Research consistently shows that diversity initiatives deliver results

beyond basic representation.

McKinsey's latest analysis found that for every woman added to a company board with 10 directors, there was on average a two-point increase in holistic impact scores measuring social and environmental outcomes alongside financial performance.

The evidence is clear: inclusive business practices create competitive advantage, drive innovation and deliver superior financial results. As Canadian

business leaders navigate an increasingly complex global landscape, diversity isn't just a moral imperative – it's an economic necessity.

Companies that embrace inclusion don't just create better workplaces. They build more resilient, innovative and profitable organizations that serve their communities while delivering value to stakeholders. The numbers prove that when barriers come down, performance goes up. ■

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SAYING GOODBYE TO DEI

Embracing Human Rights to Retain Full Participation and Dignity in the Workplace

By Jose Patiño-Gomez, Director of External Relations, Pride at Work Canada / Fierté au travail Canada

We have all watched as our neighbours to the south systematically dismantle their diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) departments. These are fundamental programs that have been instrumental in driving real progress for equity-deserving communities in the workplace, especially within the last

decade. Malicious and shortsighted, these sweeping cuts are part of a co-ordinated effort to erode human rights, sow division and reverse the critical advancements that have supported 2SLGBTQI+ individuals, gender-diverse people and countless others whose aspirations have long been hindered by systemic discriminatory practices.

Will we see the end of these fundamental workplace pillars in Canada? That was the question on everyone's minds when Pride at Work Canada hosted our Winter Pride event in Montreal this past February. It's also cropped up in many of the ongoing conversations we've had with our partners since. Will Canadian corporations follow suit?



What about cross-border companies? Will corporate leaders reassure their 2SLGBTQI+ employees that these policies aren't going anywhere, and that our rights are non-negotiable? What will they do to ensure that we, as employees, can continue to feel safe and show up to work as our authentic selves?

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN CANADA

Thankfully, early indications suggest that we are not facing a significant backlash against DEI in Canada. While it's true that some companies may drop their commitments – and we've seen a few cases in the news – we're also hearing from numerous companies that are doubling down and increasing their investment in DEI programs. In fact, over 700 Canadian tech executives recently signed an open letter urging Canadian businesses to protect their DEI practices in the face of the current U.S. trend. Furthermore, recent developments in U.S.-Canada trade relations seem to have sparked a sense of national unity and pride around our shared values and commitments, reinforcing our distinct identity and autonomy as Canadians that almost serves as a rebuke to U.S. leadership and policy.

However, we do need to be ready for when the fight comes here. Just pick up a Canadian newspaper or scroll through social media and you'll see how many people are still triggered by words like “inclusion,” “woke” or “DEI.” So, perhaps it is time for a different approach, one that allows us to sidestep the conflict and take proactive steps to further entrench our rights, making them harder to take away. At Pride at Work Canada, we've been developing tools to help our network of nearly 300 Proud Partners across the country as they navigate these ideological challenges and usher in the next phase of workplace inclusion. And it all begins with the language we use.



THE WEAPONIZATION OF DEI LANGUAGE

It's become evident that the term “DEI” has been weaponized in the political landscape, co-opted by the anti-gender movement to advance a discriminatory agenda. As it continues to be politicized on such a large scale, it's clear that its original meaning has been lost. What began as a genuine effort to make workplaces more inclusive for historically marginalized groups is now being framed as a tool for social manipulation and ideological warfare. The original definition has been distorted so much that it is now a dog

whistle for those seeking to roll back our rights. This shift has also made it more challenging for some of these programs to maintain their legitimacy and effectiveness in fostering true workplace inclusion.

We believe it's time to say goodbye to the term “DEI.” As queer and trans folks, we understand that language holds significant power. Words have always been weaponized to define or harm us. Sometimes, we've reclaimed them (as we did with queer); but many times, we've rejected them (I won't list any here). In the wrong hands, words carry too much power, which is why traditional “DEI language” has



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now become a liability for us all. To counter misinformation and foster safe, affirming workplaces, it's time to move beyond this charged language and return to the foundational principles of human rights.

THE CASE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Emphasizing human rights not only safeguards workplace inclusion but also upholds the broader values of tolerance, respect and dignity. It reframes the conversation around freedom and equality for all, regardless of identity. Even if the terms we use are different, the goals remain the same: creating fair hiring practices and career opportunities, increasing representation and fostering environments where everyone is valued.

Under Canadian law, every employee has the right to a workplace free from discrimination and harassment. Employers are duty bearers, legally obligated – not just morally responsible – to uphold and protect these rights. A human rights-based approach emphasizes individual agency and ensures equal opportunities for all employees, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or background. This focus shifts workplace initiatives to shared values that cannot be co-opted by bad actors and ensures that everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

This shift marks an important first step in reimagining how we talk about the work we do. Recently, Pride at Work Canada released its Emergency Messaging Guide to provide organizations with the tools they need to respond to this moment. Free to download, the guide expands on the need to adopt a human rights-based approach and provides practical strategies and guidance for shifting the language and reframing conversations. It also reminds employers that effective leadership and transparency are required during this critical time.



“ It’s time to move beyond this charged language and return to the foundational principles of human rights. ”

HOW TO LEAD

Your leadership today will shape workplace safety for years to come. To make a meaningful impact, your commitment must be visible to your employees; neutral messaging isn't enough. In light of policies denying queer and trans existence, your employees need to know they are seen and valued. Silence isolates, and your support can make all the difference. Take action by showing pride all year round and actively participating in initiatives. Strengthen your workplace by aligning policies with human rights law, ensuring clear reporting mechanisms and implementing accountability measures to protect employees from discrimination. Stay engaged by

connecting with other employers dedicated to upholding human rights in the workplace.

As the political and social climate continues to evolve, it's essential to shift our language and focus, moving away from divisive rhetoric towards a human rights framework. This approach upholds the core values of fairness, dignity and representation in the workplace, regardless of identity, and empowers individuals to fully contribute their talents. This shift isn't merely a reaction to political polarization – it's a return to universal principles that unite us, safeguarding a workplace where everyone can thrive. Though the words may change, the commitment remains unchanged. ■

PRIDE IN PROGRESS

How 2SLGBTQI+ Founders are Redefining Impact, Innovation and Investment in Canada's Tech Ecosystem

By Eustacio (Andy) Saldaña, Co-Founder & COO, QueerTech

In Canada's fast-evolving innovation economy, a new generation of tech founders are changing what it means to lead with impact and scale with innovation. This new wave of 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs aren't just launching startups; they're engineering breakthrough technologies with the power to reshape industries, unlock untapped markets and drive national economic growth.

The inaugural QT Founders Qatalyst Accelerator cohort, funded by CGLCC and ISED, proves what the data suggest: Despite receiving only 0.5 per cent of venture capital funding, queer-owned ventures outperform industry averages, creating 36 per cent more jobs, achieving 44 per cent more successful exits and acquiring 114 per cent more patents.

Meet six companies from the 2025 Qatalyst cohort using tech to transform industries and change lives.

Emergency Management Logistics Canada Scott Cameron, Co-Founder

Emergency Management Logistics Canada is a directory-based business designed to enhance community emergency capacity and resilience through connection and preparedness.

WHAT PROBLEM ARE YOU SOLVING?

"In Canada, disaster response and recovery is the responsibility of local jurisdictions. This means that every municipality, First Nation, Métis or Inuit community across the country must have an emergency management plan and a designated director of emergency management (DEM). Needless to say, emergency management in local communities is often done from the corner of the desk.

"The EMLCanada platform is designed to better connect governments, NGOs, businesses and community organizations so that in disaster situations, community resources are more easily identified and deployed, improving disaster response and recovery efforts. The EMLCanada platform is the only solution in Canada and is beginning to attract international attention."



WHAT WILL BUSINESS GROWTH LOOK LIKE WITHIN A YEAR? FIVE YEARS?

"We've been working closely with the Canadian Red Cross to deliver the EMLCanada platform free to all Alberta municipalities, First Nation and Métis communities, local businesses and community organizations. Over the next 12 months, we anticipate continued partnership with the CRC with possible expansion and research to model a system for community emergency preparedness. Over the next five years, we expect to achieve full implementation across Canada with several international assignments as well."

Tiny Ghost Studios Mayumi Rollings, CEO

Tiny Ghost Studios is a storytelling tech company redefining author income and creative control with interactive 3D narratives, scalable AI and author-owned IP, building the ultimate community where authors create, readers play and stories connect us all.

WHAT PROBLEM ARE YOU SOLVING?

"We are providing an avenue for storytellers to develop community and revenue in an equitable way. The barriers to entry in the traditional publishing industry are high, and though the numbers are almost split down the middle between binary gendered authors, the representation of BIPOC, queer and Indigenous authors is frustratingly low. We're fixing that."

WHAT WILL BUSINESS GROWTH LOOK LIKE WITHIN A YEAR? FIVE YEARS?

"The next year will see a lot of market validation and debugging as we produce our MVP and introduce our first stories and authors to the market. We expect to break even in year 2 and experience a sharp rise in revenue as we expand our content



library and break into the international market. Our goals are to expand into Japan and Korea within this time frame."

WHAT WOULD CHANGE IF MORE QUEER FOUNDERS HAD ACCESS TO CAPITAL AND VISIBILITY?

"It would strengthen not just the ecosystem, but the entire economy. We'd see a significant shift in innovation through diverse perspectives, and we would see products and services addressing needs that mainstream businesses have missed."

trippl inc. Shelley Montreuil, Co-Founder & CEO

trippl is a travel tech company transforming local economies by connecting tourism, data and travellers through a white-label trip-planning platform that equips destination management organizations (DMOs) with visitor insights and offers travellers a personalized, seamless planning experience.

WHAT PROBLEM ARE YOU SOLVING?

"Tourism is a tricky business to navigate if you're the little guy with limited resources. Getting featured on Google and in larger travel sites takes technical expertise, time and money, three things most tourism operators don't have. By supporting DMOs, we are able to democratize tourism marketing and first-party data to help operators book more business and understand where that business is coming from. Communities with strong tourism have a stronger economy. Larger tourism operators tend to dominate the space; we exist to help level the playing field for smaller operators to be able to run profitable businesses."



WHAT WILL BUSINESS GROWTH LOOK LIKE WITHIN A YEAR? FIVE YEARS?

"We're getting ready to launch our first four paid pilots which will allow us to gather data and traction for use in iterating our product and growing our sales portfolio. In the next 12 months, I see us doing a deep dive on product market fit and within five years we expect to hit \$6 million of annual recurring revenue."

Flowva Jessie Udah, Co-Founder

Flowva is your smart library for discovering, organizing and managing work tools. Your digital life simplified.

WHAT PROBLEM ARE YOU SOLVING?

"We're solving the growing problem of digital tool fragmentation and subscription overload. As the SaaS ecosystem has exploded, professionals are using more tools than ever before, often with overlapping functionality and forgotten subscriptions draining their finances."

WHAT WILL BUSINESS GROWTH LOOK LIKE WITHIN A YEAR? FIVE YEARS?

"We're focused on refining our core features and growing our user base. We plan to introduce features that will help our users better understand their tool usage patterns and expand our rewards program. Looking ahead five years, I see us evolving into a comprehensive platform that not only helps manage tools but becomes a central hub for digital professionals. We will be the essential starting point for anyone building their digital toolkit, with a global community of users sharing insights."



WHAT WOULD CHANGE IF MORE QUEER FOUNDERS HAD ACCESS TO CAPITAL AND VISIBILITY?

"We'd see a transformation in the tech industry and beyond. We'd witness the creation of products and services that address previously overlooked needs, particularly for marginalized communities. Innovation would flourish from diverse perspectives tackling problems from new angles. Company cultures would evolve as more founders build organizations with inclusion baked into their DNA from day 1, rather than as an afterthought."

BetterTable Ben Liegey, Founder & CEO

BetterTable™ is a Vancouver-based benefit company helping commercial kitchens save money, cut food waste in half and reduce carbon emissions. It empowers culinary teams and hospitality leaders through online training, comprehensive on-site food audits and innovative technology to waste less and earn more.

WHAT CATALYZED YOUR FOUNDING JOURNEY?

"After immigrating to Canada in 2018, I was stunned by the scale of food waste — 58 per cent uneaten, \$49 billion lost annually — while one in seven Canadians faces food insecurity. With a decade of experience in food sustainability in Europe, my journey as a founder began in 2019, after experiencing first-hand food waste in the B.C. hospitality industry. An executive MBA and cost control certificate strengthened my skills, leading to the launch of BetterTable™: a business focused on reducing food waste, carbon emissions and boosting profits to create a more sustainable future."



WHAT WILL BUSINESS GROWTH LOOK LIKE WITHIN A YEAR? FIVE YEARS?

"In the next 12 months, we will launch the BetterTable™ app, transitioning to a subscription model that automates food audits and tracks carbon footprints. We'll expand across Canada, grow partnerships with values-aligned organizations and increase online revenue. By 2030, BetterTable™ will achieve net zero. We will become a global leader in food sustainability, helping clients save millions and reduce emissions. We'll partner with governments and large hospitality chains while expanding into Europe and Latin America."

Carthalis Aziz Mezlini, CEO

Carthalis is a health tech AI company helping people make informed health decisions and reduce reliance on overburdened clinical systems by using specialized algorithms and large language models to deliver timely insights from text, images, audio and wearable data.

WHAT CATALYZED YOUR FOUNDING JOURNEY?

"I'm a scientist turned founder. I had my PhD in machine learning at the University of Toronto and completed a postdoc at Harvard Medical School. I spent the past 15 years applying AI to health care. Throughout this journey, I became increasingly frustrated that so many incredible advances in AI and health never reach the people who need them most. That's why I created Carthalis — to bridge that gap and make powerful health tools accessible to everyone."

WHAT WILL BUSINESS GROWTH LOOK LIKE WITHIN A YEAR? FIVE YEARS?

"In the next 12 months, I envision a steadily growing user base leveraging the platform for personalized health insights



and support ... we plan to introduce right-in-time product recommendations, connecting users with innovative, emerging health products tailored to their needs. As our community grows, we aim to partner with pharmaceutical companies to recommend relevant clinical trials and with health insurance providers to help improve the health outcomes of their members."

Canada's next wave of tech leaders are already here, building ventures that are bold, scalable and rooted in real-world impact. From AI health care and storytelling to sustainable food systems, the inaugural cohort of the QT Founders Qatalyst Accelerator is transforming industries and reshaping the innovation economy.

ABOUT QUEERTECH

QueerTech is on a mission to queer the Canadian tech ecosystem. Operating since 2016, QueerTech is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting workforce and economic development across Canada by fostering entrepreneurship and providing opportunities for the 2SLGBTQI+ community to access employment, professional development and meaningful connections in the technology industry. The organization is also a national leader in workplace inclusion advocacy and progressive 2SLGBTQI+ equity, diversity and inclusion policy facilitation. ■

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TWO BUSINESSES, TWO PERSPECTIVES



MELANIN MOSAIC IS DOING BUSINESS, DIFFERENTLY

Mosaics take individual and unique pieces and combine them to create a larger work of art.

As humans, we all have our own mosaic — unique pieces of ourselves that make up who we are as individuals. But Lanise Lywood (she/her) noticed that in many cases, counselling and therapy services don't consider all the intersectionalities of our mosaics.

"Whenever I'm looking for services, whether that be therapy or other things, it's really hard to find a place that has a baseline understanding of multiple intersectionalities. So maybe I could feel a deep sense of belonging in Black spaces, but they didn't necessarily have the space for my queerness," said Lanise. "I wanted to be able to bring in all my knowledge of a bunch of different cultures and life experiences to offer people that baseline understanding."

She wanted to do business differently. So, she created Melanin Mosaic.

Lanise uses her knowledge and experience to tailor therapy sessions for her clients' backgrounds, identities, abilities, access, and needs.

"Melanin Mosaic is all about bringing every little piece of who you are and putting those pieces together."

Lanise said her clients often feel relief because they've found a space where they can be completely themselves.

"To see people's relief when realizing, 'Oh, it can be this easy. It can feel this organic. It can feel this safe.' That's probably the most rewarding part for me," said Lanise.

Lanise's lived experience and psychotherapy background make her well-equipped to meet her clients' needs, but running a business was outside her expertise. She recently joined Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC) to access resources that help her run her business.

"I'm a therapist. They don't really teach you about business," said Lanise. "I had all of these ideas of what to do next and I really needed some help honing in on strategy."

She enrolled in CGLCC's OUT For Business Mentorship Program, which matches mentees with a skilled mentor who can share wisdom about being a 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneur. Lanise said her mentor not only helped her fine tune her business practices, but she also validated her intuition.

"As a solopreneur, it's really helpful to have someone to bounce those ideas off of. When everything is just in your own

head or in your notebook, it can be hard to feel self-assured about doing the right thing at the right time," she said.

Lanise also enjoys the community the CGLCC ecosystem brings. Being a CGLCC member means you get access to a network of diverse business owners with like-minded values.

"Just being able to share our lives and our own stories, then to support each other's business journeys as well has been really cool."

With the confidence Lanise has gained as a business owner, she's been able to expand Melanin Mosaic's service offerings beyond one-on-one therapy. Now she also offers a COVID-19 support group, a therapy group that runs like a book club focused on Black and 2SLGBTQI+ authors, online community spaces, and she often hosts webinars on topics such as new perspectives on coping strategies, mental health and wellness for Black survivors of gender-based violence, new perspectives on coping strategies, diversity in leadership, and more.

Much like the mosaics of her clientele, the mosaic of Lanise's business is coming together piece by piece. And with the resources from CGLCC, she'll have more opportunities to grow and thrive.

After completing the OUT For Business Mentorship Program, mentees are invited to pursue membership as Certified Suppliers.



EY IS DOING BUSINESS, DIFFERENTLY

EY has been a Corporate Member through Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC) since the program's early days. A longstanding sponsor of CGLCC's Black and White Gala and partner for the EY/CGLCC Pitch Competition, EY has been active in the chamber's ecosystem.

But is this corporation just trying to check off a box? We chatted with Lindsay Swanson (she/her), EY's Canadian Leader of ESG Services, Supplier Diversity and Inclusion, who told us all about how EY is both talking the talk and walking the walk.

EY has been a champion for DEI since its inception 150 years ago. Its founder, Arthur Young, was hard of hearing and had vision loss, so since the beginning, the company has been committed to breaking glass ceilings and redefining what diversity means. EY has built several programs that celebrate individual

differences, regardless of ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion, socioeconomic background, working and thinking styles, and abilities.

"It's not just lip service. We're really focused on creating programming and creating value that ultimately brings people together," said Lindsay. "We're seeing how the brand uplifts people both internally and externally because of it. They're able to see that alignment and the safe space EY creates."

EY's supply chain is small but powerful. Being a Corporate Partner is about more than taking advantage of the network of diverse suppliers. To them, it's about using the size and power of the firm to be a leader in DEI. So, Lindsay and her team organize events and activities to involve diverse suppliers and connect them with like-minded organizations.

"We're looking for different ways to engage with the community and raise awareness. We just want to help do good things and bring people together," said Lindsay. "And are we closing a deal tomorrow? No. But have we helped diverse suppliers forge relationships with actual people who have attended these events? Absolutely."

EY is a Big Four accounting firm that provides businesses integrated services in assurance, consulting, strategy and transactions, and tax. As a firm that offers several business management services to its clients, it knows a thing or two about how to make an organization run better. EY knows to be profitable, competitive and representative, it *needs* to be diverse, equitable and inclusive.

"As a professional services organization that relies on the best talent to stay ahead, we need the smartest and most talented people. Those people aren't going to be from one single community," said Lindsay.

McKinsey & Company research shows that companies with a diverse workforce are 35% more likely to experience greater financial returns than their non-diverse counterparts.

Lindsay also noted the value of DEI on employee retention. Research shows that diverse workforces lead to a greater sense of belonging, which increases retention.

"Once you get the smartest people in the door, you need the loyalty to keep them there," said Lindsay. "When your employees have a sense of pride for their workplace and when the organization has a sense of pride for its employees, I fully believe the employees are less likely to leave at the next shiniest job offer."

And during a time when some large corporations are scaling back their DEI policies, EY is doubling down on its values. Lindsay said becoming a Corporate Member should be a no-brainer for companies that want to invest in inclusive practices right now.

"Do it because it's the right thing to do and it gives you access to businesses that you might not have been aware of. It opens up a whole new network of not only the small- to medium-sized businesses but the corporates as well."

EY's involvement in CGLCC shows its commitment to creating a more equitable working world and doing business differently. To learn more about how your organization can do the same, learn how to become a Corporate Member today.

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CREATING RIPPLES TO SUPPORT TRANS CANADIANS

How One Organization Broke Down Barriers, Stigma and Discrimination

By Scott Cameron

When Amelia Newbert and Lindsay Peace founded Skipping Stone nearly a decade ago, their shared mission was deeply personal and radically hopeful. What began as informal meetups in Calgary coffee shops has evolved into one of Alberta's most respected and impactful organizations supporting trans and gender-diverse individuals. Today, Skipping Stone is a lifeline for many across the province, providing wrap-around services that meet people where they are and help them move toward where they want to be.

"Skipping Stone is about the power that family and community have when they come together," says Newbert, the organization's managing director. As a founder, her work bridges the internal needs of the organization with its external mission: to help people connect, thrive and live their best lives.

Located in Calgary, Skipping Stone serves clients across Alberta through a hybrid model that combines in-person and virtual services. Approximately half of their clients are based in Calgary, while the other half are spread across Edmonton and over 30 other communities. The organization supports trans and gender-diverse youth, adults and their families, while also engaging with the broader public through outreach and education to build more inclusive communities.

The desire to foster wider community inclusion sparked the creation of the Trans Affirming Network (TAN), a bold initiative that connects businesses with the tools and training to create welcoming environments for trans and gender-diverse individuals.

"At first, we thought the biggest barriers would be systemic: health care, education, legal systems. But over time, more and more people came to us with everyday needs," Newbert says. "Things

like finding a barber who wouldn't mock them, or a coffee shop where they could just be themselves."

TAN emerged as a response to these seemingly simple but deeply significant needs. It isn't a badge of honour businesses can purchase. It's a commitment to real, ongoing work.

Each business that joins the network must have a leader with decision-making power go through training with Skipping Stone. This training covers foundational knowledge and lived experiences and culminates in a commitment to uphold what the organization calls the "nine pillars of inclusive space." These actions include being explicitly welcoming, checking personal and organizational biases around gender, normalizing pronoun use, moving beyond the gender binary in forms and signage, and being transparent, accountable and proactive.

"The Trans Affirming Network is more than a directory," Newbert explains. "It's a community. We continue to connect with our members, provide ongoing training and offer a feedback mechanism. If someone in the community has a concern, we don't cut ties. We work with that business to improve."

The network boasts over 200 members and is expanding beyond Alberta. Businesses in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec have also joined, benefiting from Skipping Stone's virtual training options and self-directed modules. These flexible access points mean that any Canadian business can participate, and more importantly, can commit to growth.

"We want people to not just get the sticker for their window. We want them to be in conversation with us, to keep learning and adapting. That's what real inclusion looks like," Newbert says.

TAN's impact is best seen through the stories of those who use it. One person, who never needed Skipping Stone's direct services, said the network became their go-to resource for everyday needs: where to eat, where to go for physiotherapy, even where to find a realtor. That kind of trust doesn't come easily. It's earned, one affirming experience at a time.

Businesses, too, are transformed by their participation. Newbert shares the



story of an electrolysis provider who initially joined TAN to better serve a few trans clients. Over time, she pivoted her entire business model to centre affirming care, even speaking nationally about inclusive practices. Her business has grown so much that it's now difficult to get an appointment. "She became a champion in her field," says Newbert.

In many ways, TAN is a model for what can happen when trans folks, allies and businesses work together. "It's not about being perfect. It's about making a commitment to do better, and then actually doing the work," Newbert says. "When we create spaces where people feel safe and affirmed, everyone benefits."

For businesses across Canada looking to be part of this movement, the path is

clear. Skipping Stone offers in-person, virtual and self-directed training. The process is accessible, and the impact is profound. As Newbert puts it, "If nobody else is going to do it, then our community will take care of itself. But the invitation is there: join us, learn with us, grow with us."

In a time when trans rights and inclusion continue to face pushback, the work that Skipping Stone and TAN do is more vital than ever. It's not just about safety, though that's essential. It's about dignity, joy and the freedom to live fully. And thanks to this grassroots effort turned province-wide movement, more and more people are finding the spaces where they truly belong. ■

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BREWS

BUILDING A RESILIENT SUPPLY CHAIN

By Leila-Indira Mohabeer-Ortiz

Why Inclusion Makes Good Business Sense

In an era of economic uncertainty and varying consumer expectations, corporate strategies are evolving to reflect a broader commitment to environmental, social and governance (ESG) priorities. While diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts have faced increasing scrutiny, it's crucial to recognize how these values – particularly when embedded through social and sustainable procurement – can serve as powerful drivers of business resilience and innovation.

It's important to distinguish that while DEI often lives within human resources – focusing on workforce representation, culture and internal practices – supplier diversity generally resides within the procurement function. This distinction underscores how the principles of inclusion can and should extend beyond talent pipelines to influence how companies source goods and services.

Supplier diversity refers to the integration of equity-deserving suppliers

into corporate supply chains. Far from being just a moral imperative, this approach aligns with corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals and offers tangible benefits to companies seeking to future-proof their operations and meet evolving interest-holder expectations.

UNDERSTANDING SUPPLIER DIVERSITY IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Supplier diversity practices intentionally incorporate businesses owned and operated by individuals from equity-deserving groups, such as Indigenous peoples, racialized individuals, women, 2SLGBTQI+ individuals, veterans and persons with disabilities, into corporate supply chains.

In Canada, organizations like Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC), Canadian Aboriginal and Minority Supplier Council (CAMSC) and the Inclusive Workplace and Supply Council of Canada (IWSCC) play pivotal roles in promoting supplier diversity.

These entities certify diverse suppliers and facilitate connections between these businesses and corporate buyers, fostering inclusive economic growth. They also make up the Supplier Diversity Alliance Canada (SDAC), which was established in 2016 to advance the state of supplier diversity in Canada.

WHY SOCIAL PROCUREMENT STRENGTHENS CORPORATE BUSINESS STRATEGY

Integrating diverse suppliers at various tiers of the supply chain supports innovation across all stages by introducing new perspectives informed by lived experience. These businesses often exhibit agility, allowing them to adapt swiftly to market changes and offer unique insights that resonate with Canada's diverse consumer base. Partnerships with diverse suppliers can also lead to cost efficiencies due to leaner operations costs.

Moreover, social procurement strategies enable corporations to build

trust within various communities, expand market reach and meet environmental, social and governance (ESG) mandates. As an example, the Better Buying Initiative by Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) “contribute[s] to increasing the diversity of suppliers and reducing barriers and enhancing economic and social opportunities for underrepresented groups.”

Integrating social procurement into supply chain strategy offers tangible benefits beyond meeting corporate social responsibility goals. Beyond economic inclusion, it drives creativity, social trust and market competitiveness:

- **Innovation and Agility:** Diverse suppliers bring to the table a wide variety of perspectives and innovations informed by lived experience, providing companies with fresh ideas and approaches.
- **Community Engagement and Trust:** Demonstrating a commitment to social procurement helps build trust with traditionally under-served communities by showcasing dedication to social responsibility and economic empowerment.
- **Market Expansion:** Collaborating with diverse suppliers can enhance a company’s understanding of and access to diverse market segments, fostering brand loyalty and expanding customer bases.

A report by the Conference Board of Canada underscores that supplier diversity not only aligns with corporate social responsibility goals but also contributes to economic growth by creating mutually beneficial relationships between large organizations and small to medium-sized enterprises owned by underrepresented groups.

Moreover, a study conducted by CAMSC, CGLCC and WEConnect International in 2022 revealed that 60 per cent of participating Canadian companies believe that engaging with diverse suppliers has a positive impact, with 88 per cent measuring their community impact through spending with diverse businesses.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING SUPPLIER DIVERSITY

Despite the clear advantages, many corporations encounter obstacles when

adopting social procurement initiatives. Legacy systems, unconscious biases and lack of clarity around how to establish such programs, often impede progress. Collaborating with intermediary organizations like CGLCC becomes invaluable in navigating these challenges. These organizations offer certification services and connect companies with diverse suppliers. They provide strategic guidance to align procurement practices with CSR objectives and supplier development to ensure sustainable collaborations.

Internal alignment is also crucial. Procurement teams should work closely with ESG and operations departments to set measurable goals, assess their current vendor portfolios and identify opportunities for inclusive sourcing. Social procurement can, and should, act as a bridge between DEI initiatives and greater CSR/ESG objectives. Furthermore, leadership commitment, comprehensive buyer education and robust supplier onboarding processes are key pillars of a sustainable and impactful supplier diversity strategy.

CASE STUDIES: SUCCESS STORIES IN CANADIAN SUPPLIER DIVERSITY INITIATIVES

Several large entities in Canada have successfully integrated supplier diversity into their procurement strategies and CSR efforts, to positive outcomes:

- **City of Toronto:** Launched in 2016, the city’s Social Procurement Program aims to leverage the city’s purchasing power to drive inclusive economic growth. By integrating supplier diversity and workforce development into procurement processes, the city has increased access to opportunities for diverse suppliers.
- **Public Services and Procurement Canada’s Pilot Project, Policy on Social Procurement and Supplier Diversity Action Plan:** The pilot project resulted in contracts awarded to 55 suppliers from underrepresented groups, employment for 297 individuals from these groups and over 8,600 hours of training provided. This project demonstrated the feasibility and benefits of incorporating social procurement at the federal level and it is from this that the policy and action plan were developed.
- **Accenture:** Accenture has been delivering its global Supplier

Development Program (SDP) since 2006. This training and mentoring program was created to further develop and expand relationships with diverse suppliers across seven SDP countries, including Canada. SDP offers two main pillars of support: one-on-one mentoring between Accenture mentors and diverse suppliers, and training, including quarterly symposiums, webinars and access to Accenture’s online training academy. As of November 2024, more than 280 diverse suppliers had completed the program.

- **Johnson & Johnson:** Operating since 1998, Johnson & Johnson’s Global Supplier Diversity & Inclusion Program provides an opportunity for the company to work with a variety of diverse suppliers that can meet the diverse needs of their customer and patient bases. J&J has spent more than \$20 billion with Tier 1 diverse suppliers since being inducted into the Billion Dollar Roundtable in 2013. Through this and other programs, J&J has created avenues to ensure that small and diverse suppliers are included in its supplier selection processes by increasing their visibility in its purchasing platform and hosting buyer-supplier matchmaking events.

CONCLUSION

Social procurement is not a checkbox exercise. It’s a lever for economic empowerment, innovation and sustainable growth. At a time when some companies are reconsidering the language around DEI, it’s more important than ever to stay grounded in the business case for inclusive practices. Whether framed under ESG, CSR or supply chain resilience, the outcome is the same: stronger companies and stronger communities.

CALL TO ACTION

It’s time to evaluate how your organization can integrate inclusive procurement into its operations. As we work to source more from local Canadian suppliers in an uncertain market, it is as timely as it is advantageous to expand your social procurement efforts to intentionally include supplier diversity. Evaluate your procurement strategies and consider how they can benefit from more inclusive practices. Engage with certifying councils, identify diverse suppliers you can work with and align your purchasing decisions with long-term strategic goals. Significant financial, reputational and societal returns await you. ■



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Plus Compagnie



RAINBOW REGISTERED

Creating Year-Round Allyship and Inclusion

By Leila-Indira Mohabeer-Ortiz and Julie-Léonora Kesck

When we speak about allyship, the question often arises: how can we show our support truly and authentically? How do we engage with the 2SLGBTQI+ communities in a way that is supportive rather than performative? Every year, as June approaches, we see rainbows appearing on streets and window displays. But what distinguishes a genuine step towards inclusion from a mere communication strategy?

Pride Season is a time of celebration, gathering and community. It is also a time to remember that inclusion is not something to be taken for granted. Canada is home to over 100,000 2SLGBTQI+-owned businesses. These businesses generate over \$22 billion in economic activity and employ over 435,000 Canadians. Though we have made significant progress as a society, 2SLGBTQI+ business owners still face significant barriers. A study by

CGLCC and Deloitte reported that one in four 2SLGBTQI+ business owners has faced discrimination because of their identity, and one in four has lost opportunities after identifying as 2SLGBTQI+. ^{1, 2}

In this context, the question of allyship is fundamental, as we can only break barriers if we gather behind shared inclusive values. In the business community, business owners, organizations and entrepreneurs can create strong

networks for safer spaces and equal opportunities for everyone. And this is precisely what Rainbow Registered aims to do: gather allied businesses committed to creating a better world.

WHAT IS RAINBOW REGISTERED?

Rainbow Registered is a national accreditation that recognizes 2SLGBTQI+ friendly businesses committed to creating inclusive and welcoming environments for these communities. It is more than just a symbol; it represents a genuine commitment to creating inclusive spaces for customers, visitors and staff. By holding organizations accountable for their commitment to allyship, Rainbow Registered ensures that the 2SLGBTQI+ communities feel safer and more welcome.

Powered by Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC), Rainbow Registered is open for every business and organization in Canada to apply, regardless of the industry or size. It grants a time-limited recognition to businesses

and organizations for demonstrating compliance with the quality standard. Accredited businesses are deemed market-ready for 2SLGBTQI+ customers and given the right to be associated with the program's prestigious Rainbow Registered designation.

When you see a Rainbow Registered symbol, you know the business or organization meets a stringent set of standards to ensure that 2SLGBTQI+ customers feel more welcomed and accepted. Additionally, it enhances the

businesses' internal culture by fostering a workplace that values diversity, equity and inclusion.

Hazelview Properties, a Rainbow Registered business, manages around 200 rental apartment buildings across Canada. Their accreditation, they say, "reflects our belief that communities are really built on safety, respect and belonging." It also signals to residents that their properties are a safe place to call home. Their Story of Midtown Toronto rental residence is set to be the first rental residence in Canada to earn the Rainbow Registered accreditation. To them, this "speaks to the strength of our approach around inclusion and the consistency at which we look to apply inclusion, both within our corporate offices as well as in the properties that we operate in."

The internal culture of an office can also greatly benefit from a Rainbow Registered accreditation. Sobeys has several Rainbow Registered locations across Canada. They say that "earning this accreditation has sparked internal conversation and inspired teammates to think of new ways to embed inclusion into the work they do. From small gestures like adding pronouns to an email signature or displaying a pride flag on a desk, to larger commitments like joining working groups to support new initiatives,



© Ground Picture / Shutterstock.com





teammates are interested in learning more about how they can support 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF YEAR-ROUND ALLYSHIP

While Pride Season is a time for celebration and visibility, true allyship extends beyond these few weeks. Businesses

that are Rainbow Registered show their support and commitment throughout the year, proving that allyship is not just a seasonal commitment. Continuous support involves implementing inclusive policies, providing ongoing training and actively engaging with the 2SLGBTQI+ communities.

For Hazelview Properties, Pride Season “doesn’t necessarily begin or end in June ...When Pride Season comes around, it’s more about how can we use our platform to amplify voices? And how can we share stories and remind communities that inclusivity isn’t just a seasonal effort, but it’s really embedded in how we think, how we lead, how we strategize and how we support, 365 days a year.”

To do this, they employ several methods to keep these conversations going all year: a robust employee training platform, a speaker series that platforms dedicated speakers from the 2SLGBTQI+ community and their allies and resident programming and policies to support folks year-round.

Sobeys believes that “honouring the diversity of the 2SLGBTQI+ community is central to creating a better workplace where our differences are our strengths.” They are committed to several initiatives that focus on 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion, such as a 2SLGBTQI+ working group that provides feedback to help them evaluate their work, and their Inclusion Activators Program, comprised of 150 teammates who “champion inclusion in their local workplaces and enable the company to learn from diverse perspectives.”

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OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AND MOVING FORWARD

Businesses that commit to inclusion are building a network of allies. This collective effort fosters a sense of belonging and support, making it easier for everyone to thrive. By working together, businesses can amplify their impact and create a more inclusive society.

Sobeys says they “put a real emphasis on providing safe spaces for teammates to be themselves, and to share their experiences. This forum of intentional listening and learning is the foundation to ensure that teammates really feel that they belong, are heard and are partners in how we develop and validate inclusion initiatives that support their needs.”

The path to greater inclusion is not without obstacles. Many businesses face challenges, such as resistance to change or lack of resources. However, the success stories of Rainbow Registered businesses show that these challenges can be overcome with dedication and perseverance.

To Hazelview Properties, inclusion is essential. “It’s part of our business advantage; it’s part of our cultural foundation and it’s a social responsibility. It’s deeply embedded in the work we do through both of our belonging and our people and culture lenses, so that it’s really looked at holistically ... It builds stronger teams, it supports with diversity of thought for those who are here, and it creates more resilient communities.”



“

While Pride Season is a time for celebration and visibility, true allyship extends beyond these few weeks.

”

CONCLUSION

In these tumultuous times, where hate is on the rise and polarization and division can drive us apart, it is more important than ever to highlight the positive actions that individuals and organizations are taking to promote inclusion and acceptance.

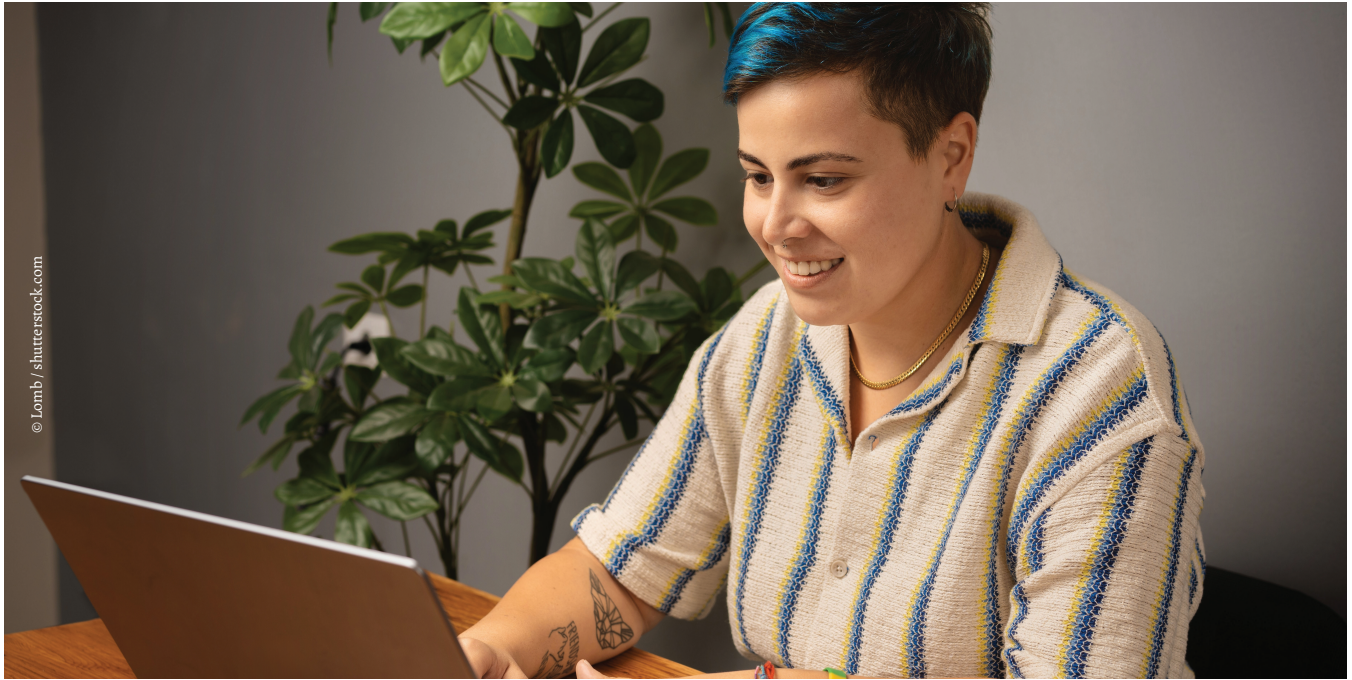
By taking the allyship a step further, Rainbow Registered businesses are leading the way in

creating inclusive environments for the 2SLGBTQI+ communities. Their commitment to year-round allyship sets a powerful example for others to follow.

Learn more about Rainbow Registered at www.rainbowregistered.ca and see how you can support or become accredited. Together, we can build a network of allies and create a world where everyone feels a sense of belonging. ■

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ASPIRING TO AUTHENTICITY

Waving a Pride Flag Just Isn't Enough

By Mario Toneguzzi

How can businesses demonstrate that they are safe and inclusive workplaces for 2SLGBTQI+ employees? The Canadian 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC) has a few ideas for companies that aspire to authenticity beyond hanging out the once-a-year Pride flag.

"The Chamber was founded in 2003, so this is the Canadian 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce's 21st year in operation, which is pretty phenomenal," says Connor McKiggan, national business development manager at CGLCC. "The Chamber has been around for 21 years working towards this mission of building a more inclusive Canadian economy."

"When we're talking about a workplace that is ready for the 2SLGBTQI+ community, we look for workplaces that have built 2SLGBTQI+ inclusivity not just into one part of their business, but holistically throughout everything they do," he adds.

This includes implementing inclusive policies, providing education and training

and fostering environments that are welcoming and supportive at all levels. "It looks like doing training, with your staff or maybe with your community or your management, your leadership, to understand who the 2SLGBTQI+ community is and what serving now looks like for your business," he says.

The Chamber also evaluates a company's internal culture and its external engagement, with a strong emphasis on inclusive leadership. "We look at the workplace's culture of inclusion and then we look at their commitment to inclusive leadership," McKiggan adds.

The Chamber's mission is reflected in Rainbow Registered, an initiative described elsewhere in this issue of *QBiz*, which partners with entrepreneurs, corporations, students and allied organizations all focused on creating inclusive workplaces and economic opportunities.

"We're seeing a lot more folks creating space for 2SLGBTQI+ colleagues. We're doing a lot more engagement with

employee resource groups," McKiggan says. "Lots of folks who are really looking to understand what true impact looks like with 2SLGBTQI+ employees."

Businesses approach inclusion in their own individual ways. "Every business that we've worked with has come through with their own set of evidence and their own interesting, unique, tailored way that they're creating inclusive workplaces," says McKiggan. "There is no copy-and-paste solution that can be applied to each workplace."

In a blog titled, "How Companies Can Support 2SLGBTQI+ Employees Coming Out in the Workplace," Proof Strategies, a Canadian PR and marketing agency, cites a joint report by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation and Pride at Work Canada, which found more than half of 2SLGBTQI+ Canadians are not comfortable being out in the workplace.

"The case for supporting authenticity at work is strong. Being your authentic self helps increase well-being and allows for deeper connections with co-workers,



Connor McKiggan
National Business Development Manager,
CGLCC



Vanessa Eaton
President,
Proof Strategies



Albert Lin
Executive Advisor and Strategist,
Pride at Work Canada

higher engagement and increased job satisfaction. Celebrating Pride Month with events and social media doesn't directly lead to an inclusive environment. It is the bare minimum that can be done. Only 59 per cent of organizations communicate strong leadership messages on the importance of 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion," the Proof Strategies blog says.

To foster a safe environment for coming out, employers must set inclusive policies and practices proactively, Proof Strategies explains. These encourage people to be their authentic selves. They need to be easily accessible and developed and reviewed constantly.

Proof Strategies also cites a report from Indeed which found 57 per cent of respondents believe employers should have specific benefits for 2SLGBTQI+ individuals, such as diversity training or benefits for domestic partners. Indeed also found that 45 per cent of prospective employees check employee benefits to ensure inclusivity.

"Policies and practices need to be embedded in a company's DNA and developed by consulting with the 2SLGBTQI+ community to ensure they are reflective of their needs. It cannot be left to heterosexual employees," states Proof Strategies' website.

"At Proof Strategies, it's important to us that our DEI efforts reflect our company values, are grounded in listening and learning and aim for long-term progress," says Vanessa Eaton, president of Proof Strategies, which has offices in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and Washington, D.C. "We see this as

an ongoing journey, one where we know there's always more to understand, and where continued listening and reflection are essential."

She adds: "Creating a DEI employee resource group or committee can offer a safe space for employee discussions, while also opening up important lines of communication with management about what's working and where there's room to improve. Similarly, employee surveys help us better understand the experiences of employees across key areas like respect, inclusion, fairness and camaraderie."

Albert Lin, executive advisor and strategist for Pride at Work Canada, says: "Our communities are in crisis, and in response, Pride at Work Canada is working swiftly to meet the needs of our employer network."

"To that end, we developed an emergency messaging guide. It's a resource that equips employers with clear,

proactive strategies to navigate current challenges and counter the rising anti-gender movement. Grounded in human rights law, it provides tools to combat misinformation, protect queer and trans employees and foster safe, inclusive workplaces where everyone can thrive without fear," he says.

Pride at Work Canada empowers employers to meet their human rights obligations on gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation. Through learning, networking and community events, it builds workplaces free from discrimination, where queer and trans people thrive. With its Proud Partner network, it envisions a Canada where everyone can achieve their full potential at work.

The Rainbow Registered program, which started in the tourism industry, has evolved to accredit 430 businesses across Canada, with 100 more currently going through the process. ■

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FROM PRIDE TO PROFIT

Misfit Ventures Powers Queer Startups

By Mario Toneguzzi

A new venture capital fund based in Vancouver is making waves across the Canadian startup ecosystem with a bold and long-overdue mission of empowering 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs by investing in the future they're building.

Misfit Ventures, founded by tech entrepreneur Mandy Potter and investment executive Doug Lui, is the country's first and largest venture capital fund focused on queer-led and queer-owned businesses.

"Misfit Ventures is Canada's first and largest venture capital fund," says Potter. "We are mostly going to be doing pre-seed, seed investments into companies that are led and equity-owned by queer individuals. We are going to do most of our investments based in Canada, about 60 or 70 per cent, and then the rest will be global, with most of them likely being in the U.S."

The fund, which quietly began its journey just about a year ago, has already made its first investment, with four more in the pipeline.

A SHARED VISION, ROOTED IN EXPERIENCE

The co-founders bring a deep well of experience and personal insight to the venture. Potter, a serial entrepreneur, has built and sold companies, raised millions in venture capital and lived in Silicon Valley, which is one of the

most competitive tech environments in the world.

"My background is being a tech founder myself. I started my first company pretty early, when I was 19," says Potter. "I've sold a company, bought a competitor, raised millions in VC myself and I've also lived in Silicon Valley, so I did the whole entrepreneurial journey there."

She adds that her experience as a queer woman in the male-dominated tech and VC space was a motivating factor in launching Misfit Ventures.

"I always knew at a very young age that I wanted to get into venture capital, trying to raise VC myself as a young tattooed queer woman, which was not the norm in Silicon Valley. It was mostly the Zuckerberg types that I was surrounded with, or competing with," says Potter. "I saw the bias first-hand and I knew one day I wanted to sit on the other side of the table and make sure that underrepresented founders were being invested in."

For Lui, the journey to Misfit Ventures was shaped by a global career and a deeply personal realization.

"I'm an immigrant. I'm originally from Hong Kong. I came here in my teenage years and I started working early, 19 as well, in EY, the accounting firm," he says. "Being a person of colour and an immigrant, it's interesting to start working in a corporate environment like that."



Doug Lui and Mandy Potter
Co-Founders,
Misfit Ventures

He recalls a boss telling him not to bring lunches that “smell so much.” That small moment left a big impression. “But, you know, being an immigrant, that is what you expect to face. And that’s OK.”

Lui spent years working in the U.S. and Asia, often feeling the need to suppress his identity as a queer man. “There are what we call bamboo ceilings for Asian folks. And in order to avoid further challenges, the

invisible minority of myself being a queer individual, I got retracted more and more into that shell.”

The turning point came during a conversation with a founder who revealed he had a husband and faced challenges in the venture world because of his identity.

“I realized that with all the progress, there is still a huge hurdle for LGBTQ+ founders. They have to fit in a certain mould,” says Lui. “Yes, being an invisible minority, sometimes you have the ability to hide that. But as an investor or venture capitalist, you do not want them to feel that way, because that’s not maximizing their potential.”

That experience led to a pivotal meeting with Potter. “We talked about starting a fund and we realized this is the first one in Canada. It was quite surprising. Thankfully, a lot of institutions expressed interest, from public to private institutions. They expressed interest in participating in a fund with such social perspective.”

BACKED BY STRATEGY AND DATA

With a five-year investment period and a \$25-million fund, Misfit Ventures plans to back 25 companies, allocating up to \$1 million per venture. Potter said businesses are selected by the interest level the two of them have for those ventures and the belief in their potential for high growth, something Misfit Ventures can help take to the next stages of growth.

“Generally, we look at a first cheque of \$250,000 to maybe half a million dollars, and we have something called follow-on,” says Lui. “The second cheque would be close to another \$500,000. So altogether we’re looking at maybe a million dollars per company.”

Misfit Ventures aims to lead investment rounds to offer not

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Investors will know this is where they can put their money to help the community.

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just capital but hands-on strategic support, including financial guidance, operational mentorship and even board participation.

Potter adds: “We want to make sure that we actually have the ability to help them properly whether it’s financials, modelling, sales, marketing, even hiring. We want to make sure it’s a really strong team, that they’ve shown resilience. Given that almost 40 per cent of companies at these early stages do pivot, we want to ensure that they’re the type of founders that can roll with those pivots, continue on and want to see this through to the end.”

The fund is sector-agnostic by design. “We don’t want to create more barriers,” says Potter. “But based on our pipeline and investments so far, we are seeing a lot of social impact ventures – clean tech, health sciences. We also see a lot of creativity in more archaic or non-traditionally impact

industries where they find an impact approach to it.”

Lui emphasizes the smart economics behind their approach. He points to a report by the organization StartOut, which surveyed over 120,000 founders across 20 years.

“The report indicates some really interesting metrics,” he says. “LGBTQ+ community founders generate 36 per cent more jobs than an average founder. They have 44 per cent more exits, meaning they manage to sell the company. And they generate 114 per cent more patents than an average founder. In addition to the social impact side, financially, economically, it’s a smart thing to do.”

SUPPORT FROM INDUSTRY VETERANS

Misfit Ventures has also built an impressive advisory board, including Arlene Dickinson, the first female

Dragon on Dragons’ Den, and leaders behind the first Indigenous, Black and women-focused venture funds in Canada.

“We were very strategic in putting our external team together,” says Potter. “Because this is a first-of-its-kind fund, we wanted to be surrounded by people who have done and have been successful in doing something similar.”

As the fund ramps up activity, the founders are focused on visibility, not just for Misfit Ventures, but for 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs across Canada.

“There are plenty of organizations that do training or accelerator programs, but there is no real capital platform for LGBTQ+ individuals in Canada,” says Lui. “Getting the word out will help them tremendously. Also, investors will know this is where they can put their money to help the community as well.” ■



QUEER FIT CLUB BLENDS SWEAT WITH SOLIDARITY

Building Safe Spaces for the Queer Community

By Hannah Pratt

When Michael Betteridge created the Queer Fit Club (QFC) in Regina in 2024, he wasn't trying to start another workout group – he was addressing a gap in inclusive and safer fitness spaces.

"I was a competitive athlete my entire life, but when I stepped away from sport, I realized how little space existed in fitness for queer expression and identity," says Betteridge, a fitness instructor and experienced brand manager. "I didn't feel unsafe exactly, but I did feel like I had to leave parts of myself at the door."

That insight, paired with nearly a decade of experience teaching indoor cycling classes, led to the creation of the Queer Fit Club. This pop-up-based fitness collective collaborates with inclusive and queer-affirming spaces to offer no-cost workouts for 2SLGBTQI+ individuals and allies.

In early 2025, QFC added Gaston Lopez Ficher, an educator, speaker, fitness instructor and leader in 2SLGBTQI+ education, who recently completed a master's degree focusing on inclusivity of queer 'hospitality' and presence in education, as an ambassador and leader of the Winnipeg branch. Now, the group draws dozens of participants to monthly events in both cities, ranging from hip-hop dance classes to indoor cycling classes, boot camps, yoga and social run clubs.

According to Betteridge and Lopez Ficher, its growing popularity is a response to an all-too-familiar experience among queer folks: feeling unsafe or unseen in traditional fitness spaces.

Under the banner "Move, build and socialize" QFC aims to offer something often lacking in big-box gyms for their queer members: safety, queer joy and community.

The need for such a space is underscored by data. A 2016 study by Out

in Sport found that nearly half (47 per cent) of queer participants found the culture around sport to be "intimidating or unwelcoming." One in four said negative experiences in school sports kept them from participating in fitness activities as adults. According to U.K.-based research cited by *Stylist* magazine, one in eight 2SLGBTQI+ adults actively avoids gyms or sports groups due to fear of discrimination or harassment.

"Those stats reflect what I lived," Betteridge adds. "Fitness can be deeply vulnerable. If you're already feeling 'othered' in society, you're not going to want to walk into a hyper-masculine, heteronormative gym."

That emotional barrier is something Lopez Ficher also encountered. "Even in more progressive cities, queer folks are navigating a lot—fear of being misgendered, assumptions about bodies, locker room anxiety," he says. "QFC flips that script. We don't want you to 'fit in.'"



We want you to show up exactly as you are.”

According to Strava’s 2024 Year in Sport Trend Report, there was a 59 per cent increase in global run club participation. More than half of Strava users (58 per cent) reported making new friends through fitness activities, and one in five Gen Z users even said they went on a date with someone they met through exercise.

QFC taps into that shift by centring the queer experience. Rather than assuming one type of fitness fits all, the team curates diverse movement styles, instructors and environments, ensuring multiple entry points for people with different needs and comfort levels.

“There’s no such thing as one ‘perfect’ queer fitness space,” Lopez Ficher explains. “That’s why QFC pops up in multiple

venues, with rotating formats. Some people feel safest in a spin studio. Others thrive outdoors. The common denominator is inclusion.”

Looking ahead, QFC has ambitions to expand beyond Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and keep adding to the more than 700 QFC members across the Prairies. But Betteridge is clear that growth won’t come at the expense of values. “We want to scale community, not just programming,” he says. “It’s not just about fitness. It’s about joy. Advocacy. Finding your people.”

For now, QFC continues to grow beyond its first birthday intentionally, one joyful workout at a time.

“Movement helped me reconnect with my authentic self,” says Betteridge. “Now we get to offer that to others. If QFC had existed when I was younger, I think I would’ve found that version of me a lot sooner.”

Michael Betteridge won the Queen City Up-and-Comer Award in May 2025 for his work with the non-profit and for launching the community. ■





By André Morriveau

Tariff Troubles

The Challenge for Canada's Queer-Owned Businesses

I still remember my first time in San Francisco, back in the summer of 1982. I had gone to work at the boutique Abigail Hotel's restaurant, arriving from Vancouver, green as they come. On my first night, I couldn't find the hotel and ended up staying at the YMCA. Who knew? Turns out, I was just three blocks away. That summer in the gay mecca sparked my lifelong love affair with our American cousins and their passion for freedom and expression, which eventually led me to Toronto and our own vibrant Village.

Today, as Pride flags rise and patios fill, Church-Wellesley is once again buzzing with energy. But beneath the celebrations, many queer-owned businesses are quietly grappling with an often-overlooked challenge: tariffs. The United States has imposed tariffs on Canadian goods as part of broader trade disputes aimed at protecting American industries. These tariff wars have strained U.S.-Canada trade relations, prompting retaliatory measures from Canada and disrupting supply chains across both countries.

While inflation and interest rates dominate headlines, import tariffs – those damaging taxes on goods brought into the country – are taking a toll on queer entrepreneurs. And in a global economy still reeling from pandemic disruptions, supply chain delays and rising protectionism, these costs are becoming harder to absorb.

Consider Toronto's Kendall & Co. Interior Design and Décor Furnishings Showroom + Interior Design Studio, a design-forward queer-owned business known for its carefully curated interiors. Many of their signature items, from bespoke furniture to European wallpaper, are imported. When tariffs rise or rules shift, it's not just a line on a receipt – it's a direct hit to their bottom line.

Owner Kendall Williams opened his Cabbagetown shop in 1998, believing his design-forward business could remain above the fray of international trade disputes. That changed when he began receiving multiple letters a day from U.S. suppliers, alerting him to new tariffs ranging from 40 per cent to 140 per cent. Add Canada's 15 per cent counter-tariffs, and suddenly the numbers no longer worked, forcing him to draw a black line through once-reliable American partners.

Like many Canadian small businesses, Kendall & Co. now faces the uncertainty of planning for critical seasons like Christmas with the threat of punitive tariffs looming. "The American market made things easier for us in the pre-tariff landscape," Williams says, "but now we have to work harder." True to form, Canadians are pivoting – Kendall included – seeking new suppliers in Canada, the U.K. and beyond, determined to stay creative and competitive no matter the policy headwinds.

This is the reality for many LGBTQ2S+ business owners. Whether its textiles, technology, spirits or plant-based wellness products, importing is a necessity, not a luxury, for businesses trying to stand out. In cities like Toronto, queer-owned enterprises in Leslieville, Parkdale and the Village bring colour, culture and character to our neighbourhoods. But their size and niche offerings often leave them especially vulnerable to trade-related costs.

And the burden isn't distributed equally. Racialized, newcomer and trans entrepreneurs face steeper barriers to accessing capital, legal expertise and supply chain alternatives. Add erratic tariffs and trade rules to the mix, and what was already an uphill climb can feel like scaling a cliff. This isn't just an economic issue – it's an equity issue.

The good news? Support systems do exist. Organizations like the Canadian Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC) are connecting queer entrepreneurs with mentorship, funding pathways and procurement opportunities. Local BIAs offer marketing support and small grants. But few initiatives are directly tackling the trade and tariff pressures that disproportionately affect our community.

Policymakers must engage with diverse small business voices — especially queer voices — when making trade decisions. A "Canada-first" economy shouldn't come at the expense of Canada's queer economy.

Queer entrepreneurs also have a role to play. We may not control global trade policy, but we can take steps to reduce exposure: building local supply chains, forming co-ops, exploring bulk purchasing and sharing logistics strategies. We can educate ourselves on customs and trade programs, and above all we can support one another through Buy Queer and Shop Local campaigns.

Because here's the bottom line: Pride is more than a parade. It's about economic survival, Empowerment and carving space in systems that weren't built for us, then thriving anyway. So next time you shop at a queer-owned business or hire a 2SLGBTQI+ creative, remember: behind that product or service is a balancing act between passion, policy and perseverance. Tariffs may be a hidden cost, but the value queer businesses bring to this country is unmistakable.

In the world of gay business, there should be no borders limiting the power of our pocketbooks. As unpredictable as these times may be, 2SLGBTQI+ Canadians have always known how to fend for ourselves. I'll always love what the U.S. brings us – from RuPaul to Stonewall, fashion to West Hollywood – but until the trade waters calm, I'll be prioritizing shopping queer Canada-side.

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