

10TH ANNUAL BLACK & WHITE GALA

CANADIAN QUEER CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE HONOURS
BUSINESS LEADERS

Business Leader of the Year Finalists



Ashifa Jumani



Jena Nasser



Jeremy Williams



Mandy Farmer



Matt Erhard



BRIDGING THE GAP

Energy Sector Inclusion
Strategies Leaving Field
Workers Behind

FUTURE-READY, BY DESIGN

Targeted Upskilling Moving
2SLGBTQIA+ Talent Into
Canada's High-Growth Sectors

A GROWING MOVEMENT

Queer Chambers of Commerce
Strengthening 2SLGBTQIA+
Business Ecosystem

BUILDING A BETTER COUNTRY

It's Time for Canada to
Harness the Power of
Diverse Suppliers

STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR QUEER ENTREPRENEURS

Chamber of Commerce Rebranded;
The FAM Program Launched

COMMUNITY PRIDE THE BUSINESS OF HIP

Old's Cool General Store
Taking Care of People



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

Offering Services to Meaningful Causes

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



Awl Together Leather



Awl Together Leather
2SLGBTQI+ Business of the Year



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PRIDE AT
WORK
CANADA



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Honours Business Leaders

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10TH ANNUAL BLACK & WHITE GALA

Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce Honours Business Leaders

By Mario Toneguzzi

At a time when more than 100,000 2SLGBTQI+-owned businesses contribute over \$22 billion to the national economy and employ more than 435,000 Canadians, the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC) recently shone a spotlight on the leaders driving this impact.

The organization's 10th Annual Black & White Gala, held on Nov. 14, recognized the winners of the 2025 2SLGBTQI+ Business Leadership Awards, honouring queer entrepreneurs and organizations that strengthen Canada's economy.

This year's award recipients include:

- **Business Leader of the Year** - Mandy Farmer (Accent Inns, Hotel Zed – B.C.);
- **2SLGBTQI+ Business of the Year** - Ariss Grutter and Tess Gobeil (Awl Together Leather – Vancouver);
- **Young 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneur of the Year** - Elsie Morden (No Time for That Anti-Bullying Society – Toronto);
- **Corporation of the Year** - Telus;
- **2SLGBTQI+ Community Impact of the Year** - Qmunity (Vancouver); and
- **Rainbow Registered Prism Award** - The Museum of Natural History – Nova Scotia (Halifax).

MANDY FARMER

Accent Inns is a B.C.-based, family-owned hotel company founded in 1986 and led by president/ CEO Mandy Farmer, who succeeded her father, Terry Farmer, in 2008. The company has become known for its playful, people-first approach, infusing humour into the guest experience while setting the standard as one of Canada's most bike-friendly and pet-friendly hotel brands.

Farmer said she started Hotel Zed in 2014 after she took over as CEO of the family business.

"I had a vision for a hotel that rebels against the ordinary, where our staff and the guests can have so much fun. Today, we've grown to multiple Accent Inns and Hotel Zed locations across B.C. and a ROAR restaurant in Tofino," she said.

"Hotel Zed welcomes every rebel and is completely safe for 2SLGBTQ+ folk. In 2022, all of Hotel Zed and Accent Inns locations became Rainbow Registered by Canada's Queer Chamber of Commerce (CGCC), the first hospitality chain to do so.

"For us, it's about so much more than putting up the rainbow flag on the wall. Establishing a Deadname Standard Operating Procedure was a big thing and our team did fulsome training to learn about the components of proper pronoun usage and terms associated with gender and human identities.



Mandy Farmer
Accent Inns president/CEO



Rebel Room, Hotel Zed Victoria

"Our Tofino location started the town's very first Pride walk and event in 2023. One guest who came out for the Tofino Pride celebrations at Hotel Zed this year said 'I forgot how great it felt to be in a queer space.'"

Regardless of whether you are a guest or employee, the intention at Accent Inns, Hotel Zed and ROAR is to provide a space where you can show up as your authentic self every day.

"This recognition was incredibly meaningful for our incredible team, who show up every day to make our hotels welcoming and fun. It encourages us to keep pushing the boundary."

ELSIE MORDEN

No Time for That was founded by performing artist and speaker Elsie



Elsie Morden
No Time for That founder

Morden, who transformed her own experience of surviving years of bullying into a national platform for change.

Through a unique blend of storytelling and music, she has delivered more than 700 keynotes across Canada, promoting bullying prevention, mental health and neurodiversity awareness, 2SLGBTQIA+ visibility and youth empowerment.

Her impact has been recognized widely, with features on national media and multiple honours, including the National Change Makers Award from Alan Doyle's Dollar A Day Foundation, Atlantic Business Magazine's Top 30 Under 30 and the CAMH 150 Leading Canadians for Mental Health Difference Makers Award. As a recording artist, she has earned over 750,000 Spotify streams and achieved a Top 100 song on Canadian country radio.

Morden, who is now based in Toronto, was born in Winnipeg, grew up in Manitoba and Kelowna, and lived in different parts of Nova Scotia.

She writes her own songs, usually on piano or acoustic guitar.

"Songwriting is one of my favourite things in the world. It helped me get through, and still helps me get through, a lot of hard times. Growing up, I experienced a lot of bullying and mental health struggles. Music and songwriting were my outlet, a way to heal and cope," said Morden.

“Music has led me to everything. It has made such an impact on my life and has actually saved my life.

“I grew up in very small towns and moved constantly. I was always the new kid and I struggled to make friends. I was the creative, queer, neurodivergent kid, which is hard in general, but especially in rural towns.

“I felt alone. I was bullied badly and struggled with my mental health. I felt hurt, misunderstood and like an outsider most of my life. I wanted to create something and use my story and songs to help and inspire other people so they didn't have to feel the way I did.

“It's so important to feel seen, heard and understood always but especially when you're struggling. Seeing yourself in an artist and their songs is life-changing.

“Seeing that they can overcome hard times, stand up for themselves and follow their dreams inspired me. I wanted to share that with others and remind them to be themselves, follow their dreams and never give up.”

The anti-bullying group, started in high school, has impacted over 800 schools across Canada.

“It's been amazing to see how many people have been helped and inspired through story and song, through programs I've delivered and through other artists we've worked with. It shows how powerful and healing music is,” said Morden.

“I want to share a quote I mentioned to all the schools. It's by Alan Turing, an iconic queer legend: ‘Sometimes it is the people no one can imagine anything of who do the things no one imagines.’ He's a legendary LGBTQ person, a mathematician and computer scientist credited with inventing the first computer. He helped us win World War II.

“His story is really inspiring but also very sad. He wasn't allowed to be himself as a gay man. He experienced so much discrimination. They tried to change him through conversion therapy. He died because of the hormones and treatments they forced on him.

“It's devastating because he was one of the most intelligent and creative people in history. I think all the time: What else could he have created if he hadn't died so young?”

AWL TOGETHER LEATHER

Awl Together Leather is a custom leatherwork and shoe repair studio in East Vancouver, co-owned by Ariss Grutter and Tess Gobeil. The pair opened the shop in May 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic with a mission to diversify a traditionally homogenous industry and offer accessible, high-quality repairs to communities near and far.

Launched through a Kickstarter campaign that surpassed its goal, raising over \$22,000, Awl Together Leather has since served more than 10,000 customers and kept more than 50,000 items out of landfills. The studio has earned wide recognition, including BC Business' 30 Under 30 (2022), finalist status in Canada Post's Tales of Triumph (2023) and features on Style Insider, Art Insider, CBC, the Stitchdown Podcast and more.

“Ariss was running a small leather alterations business before the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, it really took off. We had already been working together at a boot factory and Ariss' business grew so much that (Grutter) left and called me in for extra help.



Elsie Morden, No Time for That founder with students NTFT Tour



Tess Gobeil (left) and Ariss Grutter, Awl Together Leather co-owners

"We worked together doing that for a bit and then realized we could do it bigger and better. So we launched a Kickstarter and hit the ground running, right in that sort of midpoint of the pandemic," said Gobeil.

In 2025, the duo captured three different awards.

"Having all of these awards come in such a short amount of time really affirms that what we're doing is needed and valued by the community, and that the way we are doing it is valued by business people as well to prove that repair can be profitable and that it's in demand right now," added Gobeil.

"I think especially in a time when queer rights are being targeted, to win an award as a queer business owner is especially meaningful and special."

TELUS

Ashifa Jumani, Director Procurement at TELUS, said receiving the award was a huge honour, validating the work the company is doing in the diversity space.

"TELUS is very focused on D and I and always has been as long as I've been here. To be a corporation that partners with the various diversity organizations . . . we've had this program in place for many years."



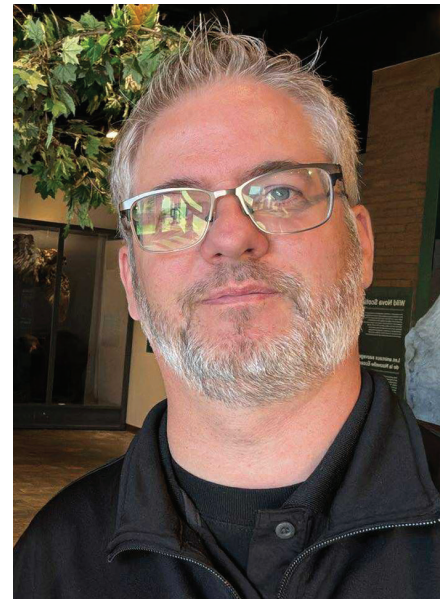
Ashifa Jumani
TELUS Director Procurement



Jeremy Williams and Stephen Menon, QMUNITY board members



Michael Robach
Qmunity interim executive director



Jeff Gray
Museum of Natural History manager

QMUNITY

Michael Robach, interim executive director, said Qmunity covers all of British Columbia through its services.

"It was founded in 1979. I find sometimes the best way to describe our work is to say that we're not a Pride organization, but rather a front-line, low-barrier mental health and social service organization catering specifically to anyone who identifies as part of the queer, trans and two-spirit community," he said.

"We really exist as a hub, a resource centre for folks who need information, supports or connection to mental health services or to community.

Last year it had over 20,000 people across British Columbia come to it for help.

MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

Manager Jeff Gray's understanding of receiving the award is for the museum showing inclusivity, being supportive through the Rainbow Registry and being a community-inclusive space.

"Obviously it's always wonderful to be recognized. But on the flip side, we're not doing what we do to be recognized for this. I was saying to staff, in some ways it's almost disappointing that there needs to be awards to recognize people for being inclusive in general.

"It's almost like I'm happy to win an award that I hope disappears over time because it's not needed to recognize people for being inclusive." ■

STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR QUEER ENTREPRENEURS

Chamber of Commerce Rebranded; The FAM Program Launched

By Leila-Indira Mohabeer-Ortiz and Julie-Leonora Kesch

Photos by Julie Riemersma

This fall, the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC) unveiled two transformative initiatives: a sweeping rebrand from its former identity as Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC) and the launch of The FAM program, a new membership tier designed to break down barriers for queer entrepreneurs nationwide.

Together, these moves represent a strategic pivot toward greater accessibility and impact at a time when rising anti-queer sentiment makes leadership and inclusion more critical than ever.

A REBRAND TO WELCOME MORE ENTREPRENEURS

For nearly two decades, the chamber operated under the CGLCC banner, advocating for 2SLGBTQI+ businesses and building tailored programs such as Supplier Diversity, OUT For Business and Rainbow Registered.

However, as language and community needs evolved, so did the organization.

The recent shift to the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce is about clarity and connection. It better reflects the diversity of the queer business community and aims to engage entrepreneurs who haven't always seen themselves represented in traditional chambers.

The use of the word "Queer" signals broader inclusivity, embracing the full spectrum of identities and entrepreneurial realities across different communities.

"We know that too many queer entrepreneurs still don't feel included or safe to be who they are within their business. Our goal is to make sure everybody has a place to be who they are and to feel included," says CQCC CEO Darrell Schuurman.

The rebrand modernizes CQCC voice and vision. It's a promise that every queer entrepreneur — from freelancers and side-hustlers to established business owners can see themselves represented.

This matters because visibility can help drive systemic change: queer businesses contribute over \$22 billion annually to Canada's economy and employ more than 435,000 Canadians yet many still face systemic barriers to capital, procurement, networks and safety in business spaces.

By adopting language that resonates and programming that delivers, the CQCC is expanding the tent. It's saying you belong here wherever you are in your entrepreneurial journey.

CONNECTING THE REBRAND TO ACTION: THE FAM PROGRAM

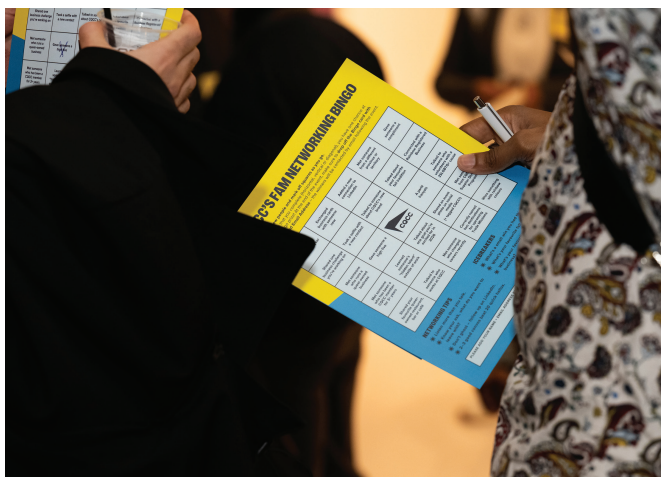
While the rebrand sets the tone for inclusivity, The FAM program is making it real. This new low-barrier membership tier is designed to welcome more 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs into the chamber's ecosystem, especially those who have felt excluded from traditional business networks.



WHAT IS THE FAM?

The FAM offers an accessible entry point for self-identified queer entrepreneurs who want to grow skills, expand networks and access opportunities without the formal commitment of full supplier certification. That said, it can also serve as an on-ramp to the CQCC's Supplier Diversity certification program, building entrepreneurs' confidence and capacity for future procurement readiness.

The FAM members gain access to industry-focused workshops that sharpen business skills and boost referrals, invitations to networking events that foster meaningful connections and a national



Community Hub where collaboration thrives.

Visibility is another cornerstone: The FAM provides spotlight opportunities that put entrepreneurs in front of new customers, fellow business owners and corporate partners eager to support queer-owned enterprises.

For corporate partners, The FAM offers early engagement with a new wave of entrepreneurs, creating trust and loyalty from the start of their business journey.

WHY NOW?

This dual launch is happening now for a reason. Rising anti-queer sentiment globally underscores the urgency of creating safer, empowering spaces for queer professionals. CQCC's initiatives are a direct response to these challenges, ensuring that inclusion is operational, not aspirational.

Andrew Edwards, CEO of designACE, a CQCC-certified supplier, captures the spirit of this moment: "Success as a queer entrepreneur means a lot. It means that as a community, we get to rise, we get to support each other. And that's what's so incredible about organizations like this."

The FAM and the rebrand together send a clear message: queer businesses are essential to Canada's economic future. They deserve visibility, resources and representation in every

conversation about growth and innovation.

GET TO KNOW THE FAM

The future of Canada's economy is inclusive.

Whether you are a freelancer, founder or corporate ally, now is the time to engage. Join The FAM, amplify your voice and be part of a movement that is rewriting the rules of business inclusion.

Visit queerchamber.ca to learn more and become a founding member today. ■

**CGLCC IS NOW THE CANADIAN QUEER
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE (CQCC)**

Visit queerchamber.ca →



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BUILDING A BETTER COUNTRY

It's Time for Canada to Harness the Power of Diverse Suppliers

By Darrell Schuurman, Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce, Chief Executive Officer

Canada stands at a pivotal moment — one that will shape how we build our future, both physically and economically.

Responding to this moment, Mark Carney's Liberal government is prioritizing national health by investing in Canadian businesses, economic security and trade diversification. These priorities demand bold, inclusive action.

How we choose to build Canada matters. The government's investment in infrastructure presents a unique opportunity: By sourcing materials and services from businesses that reflect Canada's diversity, we can create a more competitive, innovative and socially responsible economy.

DIVERSIFICATION STRENGTHENS SUPPLY CHAINS

Supplier diversification isn't charity — it's smart economics. It strengthens supply chains, fosters innovation and drives local job creation.

Consider this: More than 100,000 2SLGBTQI+-owned businesses already contribute \$22 billion to Canada's economy and employ over 435,000 Canadians. And there's room to grow.

Diverse suppliers — including 2SLGBTQI+, Indigenous, Black, racialized, women and persons with disabilities — bring resilience, creativity and community impact that benefits all Canadians.

Yet Canada is missing out. Despite federal initiatives like the Supplier Diversity Action Plan, diverse-owned businesses remain underrepresented in public and private procurement.

Too often the government defaults to legacy supply chains — the same pool of businesses it has always worked with — closing the door to new entrepreneurs eager to scale and support public investments.

Without intentional inclusion, we risk repeating old patterns and losing the full potential of Canadian entrepreneurship.

Both public and private sectors can act. Many corporations already embed inclusive procurement into their ESG commitments.

They can partner with organizations like the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC, formerly CGLCC) to identify certified diverse suppliers and report transparently on inclusion metrics.

The Government of Canada can lead by embedding inclusive procurement requirements into all frameworks, including infrastructure projects advanced through the Major Projects Office.

It can set measurable targets for certified diverse suppliers in federal contracts and expand support for certification programs and capacity-building initiatives.

Diversifying supply chains aligns directly with the Carney government's priorities on resilience and inclusive growth. For example, the Small and Medium Business Procurement Program, part of the new Buy Canadian Policy, will enable more Canadian companies to participate in federal procurement.

“ **Supplier diversification isn't charity — it's smart economics.** ”

COMPETITIVE AND INNOVATIVE ECONOMY

By ensuring these programs actively encourage the participation of diverse-owned businesses, the government can build a more inclusive, competitive and innovative economy.

There are many ways to connect with qualified suppliers. The CQCC, for instance, certifies businesses that are at least 51 per cent owned, operated and controlled by 2SLGBTQI+ Canadians.

Infrastructure is more than concrete and steel — it's about who gets to build, benefit and belong. Let's ensure the Canada we're building reflects the innovation of the people who call it home.

Let's build a better Canada, together. ■

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FUTURE-READY, BY DESIGN

Targeted Upskilling Moving 2SLGBTQIA+ Talent Into Canada's High-Growth Sectors

By Naoufel Testaouni, CEO, QueerTech

Photos by QueerTech

Rebbecca Ariss' career in the technology sector didn't follow a typical trajectory. She came from a background in arts, nursing and sign language, but while helping a hospital move to electronic documentation she found something unexpected – a fascination with tech innovation.

That spark grew into late nights of self-teaching and coding projects, culminating in a scholarship to a software development boot camp and the foundations for a new career.

Ariss soon discovered that technical skill alone wasn't enough. Like many career-shifters, she faced a competitive job market, limited

professional networks and the quiet self-doubt that can come with entering a field that still reflects a largely homogenous workforce. As a queer woman, she often questioned whether there was truly space for her in tech.

That changed when she joined **QT Access**, QueerTech's workforce development program, supported by RBC and built to help 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals access meaningful tech employment.

The program addresses unique barriers to entry, fosters community and pairs participants with mentors prepared to help them turn learning into real-world opportunity.

The program gave Ariss a peer group that understood her experience and it was through that network – while volunteering at the 2024 QT Conference – that she was introduced to a health-tech company that hired her full time.

THE GAP WE CAN CLOSE

Canada's technology workforce is set to reach 1.46 million people by the end of 2025, keeping tech among the fastest-growing segments of our economy.

Despite this growth, 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals remain under-represented. Industry analysis estimates that queer technologists make up approximately six per cent of the high-tech workforce (nine per cent when HR & Culture roles are included), while their presence in leadership roles is often just 0.6 to three per cent, varying by sub-sector.

QueerTech's *Queering the Tech Ecosystem Research Report* demonstrates that barriers to entry are tangible. More than one in three 2SLGBTQIA+ technologists said they had faced blatant discrimination during at least one job interview.

For many, that bias occurs before an interview takes place with AI screening tools found to favour non-diverse candidates up to 85.1 per cent more often. Though data does not exist pertaining to screening biases specifically related to queer professionals, this notion displays how AI-based technologies can reproduce discrimination and human-coded prejudice.

The problem doesn't disappear once people get a foot in the door. Thirty-five per cent of respondents reported harassment at work due to sexual orientation while 56 per cent reported harassment due to gender identity. These patterns slow career progression, limit retention and feed the perception that tech remains an exclusive space for too many qualified people.

This is what we mean by an opportunity gap. Canada doesn't have a shortage of queer and trans technologists with skill or ambition;

it has an ecosystem that too often filters them out through bias, inaccessible networks and unsafe work environments.

Closing that gap requires more than broad skills training. It requires upskilling delivered through a queer lens – programs built to confront bias directly, create safe learning environments and connect participants to mentors who are equipped and willing to open doors.

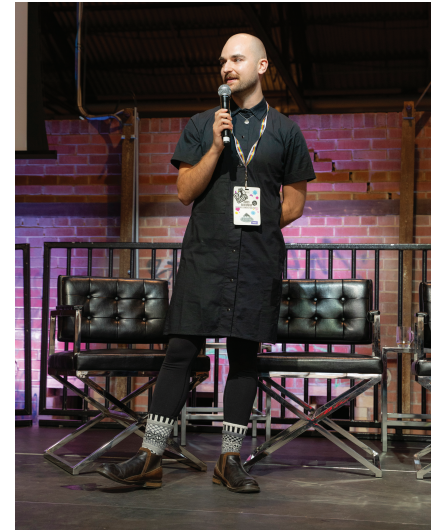
By doing so, Canada can connect untapped talent with a rapidly expanding market, turning exclusion into innovation and ensuring that the next phase of the country's digital growth includes everyone ready to build it.

WHAT TARGETED UPSKILLING LOOKS LIKE

Closing the gap isn't about teaching more people to code, it's about changing how people are prepared, supported and connected once they do. That's the approach that makes QT Access both unique and impactful; it treats upskilling as both a technical and social process.

Over 10 weeks, QT Access programming combines unlimited access to Google Coursera certifications with live training sessions, career support, networking opportunities and training in foundational AI skills.

Participants also join a structured mentorship stream where a speed-meeting event pairs them with mentors from the QueerTech community, including RBC employees.



Amos Bridgman (they_them)
Program Manager

Mentors, regardless of identity, are prepared to address the barriers queer and trans technologists face in hiring and advancement. Participants graduate with in-demand skills, professional allies and the confidence to navigate the sector long after the program ends.

This design makes QT Access *targeted*. It tackles both the skills gap and the access gap – pairing learning with networks that have been historically closed to 2SLGBTQIA+ technologists.

Since 2023, QT Access has supported more than 70 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals and is on track to support another 115 in 2025. For many, it's the first time they've been in a learning environment where their identity is understood as an advantage and not a liability.

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PROOF IN PEOPLE

For participants, the impact of targeted upskilling is measured not only in job titles but in confidence, visibility and community.

For Ariss, QT Access turned uncertainty into traction. The program gave her peers who understood her experience, mentors who helped her translate learning into opportunity and a network that continues to grow with her career. Today, she works full time in health tech and remains an active member of the QueerTech community that helped her get there.

Seasy Huang, a successful user experience and product designer, showcases what can happen when opportunity turns into influence. After completing the QT Access program, Seasy went on to join QT Leaders, QueerTech's leadership accelerator, and has since moved into decision-making roles where inclusion informs both process and product.

"Before QueerTech, I thought my career was my own challenge to struggle through alone," they said. "Since going through these programs, I feel less stress when I'm networking and more like I'm creating relationships to help myself and others in the future."



Together, these stories demonstrate what inclusion looks like in motion. When queer and trans technologists gain the tools, networks and confidence to thrive, they don't just fill roles – they redefine what belonging in tech can look like for themselves and for others.

WHY INCLUSION POWERS INNOVATION

The business case for inclusion has matured from intuition to evidence. Canada's tech sector drives roughly six per cent of national GDP and remains one of the country's most productive

industries, with output per worker about 45 per cent higher than the national average. When a sector built on creativity and problem-solving grows this quickly, widening who gets to contribute isn't just social progress, it's smart economics.

Recent research confirms that diverse teams deliver stronger results. A 2023 study found that organizations with gender-diverse leadership are 39 per cent more likely to outperform financially.

While comprehensive data on 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in Canada's tech workforce remains



Amos Bridgman (Program Manager) & Mazdak Chinichian (Specialized Facilitator) at QTQ 2024 mainstage



Seasy Huang on stage at QTQ 2024

limited – largely due to historical discrimination and the lack of consistent data collection – available research on founders paints a striking picture.

2SLGBTQIA+-founded ventures, despite receiving only 0.5 per cent of venture capital funding, have created 36 per cent more jobs, produced 114 per cent more patents and achieved 44 per cent more successful exits than the average startup.

Together, these findings underline a simple truth. When talented people have equitable access to opportunity, they drive growth and innovation at every level.

Equitable access turns diverse lived experience into competitive advantage, building more resilient teams, more creative products and innovation powered by belonging.

THE ROLE OF PARTNERS

Fostering inclusion in tech requires collaboration from the entire ecosystem. Through partnerships and collaborations, QueerTech's work gains the resources and reach needed to turn pilot programs into pathways.

Corporate supporters like RBC help ensure that the responsibility for inclusion doesn't rest solely on under-represented communities, but is shared by the institutions shaping Canada's digital future.

For participants, that collaboration means access to mentors inside major companies, career opportunities that match their skills and a real sense that change is possible from the inside out.

For partner organizations, it is more than a gesture of goodwill; it is an investment in innovation. Supporters like RBC recognize that 2SLGBTQIA+ talent has long been under-supported and under-utilized and that fostering full participation strengthens workplaces and the wider economy.

Collaborations like this make systemic change possible and sustainable. They connect community expertise with corporate influence and resources – opening doors that stay open.

WRAP UP

The next wave of Canada's digital economy will be defined not just by what we build, but by who gets to build it. Programs like QT Access show what's possible when opportunity is designed with inclusion in mind – when systems evolve to meet talent where it is rather than expect talent to fit systems that weren't built for them.

For 2SLGBTQIA+ tech professionals, that shift means more than new job titles. It means visibility, wealth creation and the chance to lead industries that reflect their values as much as their skills.

For Canada, it means a stronger, more innovative economy; one that grows by opening doors for everyone, not by letting a few profit from gates that stay closed.

That's the real story of QT Access. When people are given the tools, confidence and community to thrive, the entire ecosystem moves forward with them.



ABOUT QUEERTECH:

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

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A GROWING MOVEMENT

Queer Chambers of Commerce Strengthening 2SLGBTQIA+ Business Ecosystem

By Scott Cameron

Photos by Alberta 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce

Across Atlantic Canada, a long-awaited wave of momentum is reshaping how queer entrepreneurs and small businesses connect, collaborate and thrive.

With leadership from the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC) and investment through federal ecosystem funding, a new multi-provincial queer business organization is taking form uniting Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland

and Labrador into what will soon become the Queer Atlantic Business Network | Centre D'Affaires Queer De L'Atlantique.

This is the first multi-provincial queer chamber in the country and the energy behind it is palpable.

Project lead Corrie Melanson describes the significance plainly: "There is a chamber in every other province except the territories," she explains, noting that the gap in Atlantic Canada has been long felt.

The need was clear — not because queer entrepreneurs aren't active, but because smaller population sizes and limited funding streams have historically made cross-provincial collaboration difficult to sustain.

With federal support, however, the tide has turned. Since beginning the project in July, the team has received more than 100 survey responses and over 30 interviews and has participated in events across all four provinces.

The excitement, Melanson says, comes from “bringing these groups together under one umbrella” and watching the “momentum” build as people understand the opportunity ahead.

This new Atlantic initiative is unique not just in geography, but in structure. With Atlantic Canada’s Acadian communities spread across the region, the organization will be fully bilingual from Day One — one of only three queer business entities in Canada operating officially in both English and French, including the CQCC.

This bilingual foundation positions it to play a powerful unifying role within Canada’s broader queer economic ecosystem.

A NATIONAL RENEWAL SPARKED BY FEDERAL FUNDING

What’s happening in Atlantic Canada is not isolated. Across the country, federal ecosystem funding delivered through the CQCC has catalyzed growth, renewal and — even in long-established chambers — a new sense of possibility.

In Manitoba, the funding has enabled the chamber to hire its first dedicated staff.

“We were hired on a one-year contract to revive the chamber,” says Jenny Steinke-Magnus, noting that without federal investment much of their current work “would not have been possible.”

Manitoba used its funding to relaunch programs, strengthen membership and develop the EMERGE Queer Entrepreneur Development Program, pairing 15 entrepreneurs with 10 mentors. Participants have spoken about growing confidence, building new skills and finally accessing support in spaces where they feel safe and affirmed.

“Investing in queer entrepreneurs isn’t just equity work,” Steinke-Magnus says. “It will ultimately grow our Canadian economy.”

In Alberta, executive director Elli McDine emphasizes it even more directly: “I wouldn’t be in this role



“ Across the country, federal ecosystem funding delivered through the CQCC has catalyzed growth, renewal and — even in long-established chambers — a new sense of possibility. ”

without federal funding,” she says. Nor would their mentorship program, expanded events or growing advocacy work.

The funding has allowed the Alberta chamber to shift from “just trying to survive the next six months” to thinking strategically about the next five to 10 years. The chamber is now building data infrastructure, mapping the queer economy across the province and developing long-term initiatives such as “queer future centres.”

Similarly, in British Columbia, where Queer Business BC (QBBC) has existed since 1991, federal support and partnerships have helped revive an organization emerging from a period of dormancy.

As board member Kyle Krawchuk notes, QBBC is “getting the band back

together” — rebuilding programming, reigniting community engagement and looking to expand beyond Metro Vancouver into Victoria, Kelowna and Northern B.C.

In Quebec, 2SLGBTQI+ businesspeople are coming together during networking events to exchange best business practices and to share their entrepreneurial journeys and the chamber serves as a spokesperson and key point of contact with decision-making bodies — both socio-economic and political. Recently, the chamber launched a mentorship program as well as a co-development group.

Across these provinces, the pattern is consistent: federal investment has supplied time, staffing and stability — three ingredients essential for meaningful growth.



A COAST-TO-COAST NETWORK — WITH ONE GAP STILL TO FILL

As of 2025, every province in Canada is home to a queer chamber or queer business association. British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and now Atlantic Canada each have their own organizational hub supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals and entrepreneurs. The only remaining gap is in the Northern Territories — a shared aspiration for future expansion as capacity grows.

These chambers are not identical: each reflects its province's cultural, linguistic and demographic realities. Quebec's chamber plays an important francophone leadership role while Atlantic Canada's bilingual identity ensures that French-speaking queer business owners feel represented and supported across provincial borders.

This bilingual expansion strengthens not only regional inclusion but national cohesion — reminding us that Canada's queer economy is multilingual, multicultural and deeply interconnected.

+ Professionals (SQEP) has built a uniquely welcoming environment where members can “show up exactly as they are . . . no explanations or code-switching needed.”

This sense of belonging is echoed in organizations like the Ontario Queer Chamber of Commerce, which focuses on “safe and inclusive spaces for folks to network and grow,” and in Queer Business BC's return to its roots — creating events where long-disconnected members can reconnect and build new opportunities.

Workshops, training programs, speaker series and business directories are also common tools. Together, these efforts reflect a shared belief that queer and trans entrepreneurs thrive most when they have community, mentors and systems that affirm who they are.

SHARED PRIORITIES: MENTORSHIP, TRAINING, CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

Despite regional differences, chambers across the country are pursuing similar priorities — most notably mentorship, professional development and opportunities for queer entrepreneurs to connect authentically.

Manitoba's EMERGE program is a standout success, offering new entrepreneurs guidance from mentors “who have gone through a similar experience before.”

Alberta's chamber is delivering its second cohort of mentorship, paired with strong advocacy and new partnerships across Indigenous, Two-Spirit and sector-specific groups.

Networking remains foundational everywhere. In Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Queer Entrepreneurs

EXPANDING HORIZONS: THE URBAN-RURAL OPPORTUNITY

One theme emerged in every interview: the opportunity — and challenge — of reaching queer entrepreneurs and businesses outside major urban centres.

Manitoba is planning an outreach trip to Brandon and developing strategies for the North, where vast geography makes engagement difficult. Saskatchewan traveled to 12 communities last summer, connecting with rural entrepreneurs before forest fires cut the tour short.





Alberta is building partnerships with organizations like Wood Buffalo Pride to better understand and support businesses in northern regions such as Fort McMurray. Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island have voiced similar needs through Atlantic engagement surveys.

In Quebec, the chamber has organized conferences with experts from various fields and has visited several cities across the province (Québec City, Laval, Saguenay, Gatineau and Montréal).

The message is clear: queer entrepreneurs live everywhere and not just in big cities. As chambers grow, building truly provincial representation is both a challenge and an opportunity — and one that many are eagerly tackling.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE POWER OF LOCAL BUSINESS INVOLVEMENT

The momentum behind Canada's queer chamber movement is not only historic — it is hopeful. Across provinces, leaders speak with a shared sense of excitement about the future.

They imagine a network where queer entrepreneurs and business leaders are visible in every community; where mentorship and training programs are accessible from Charlottetown to Cranbrook; where bilingual resources help unify business owners from Quebec to New Brunswick; and where rural entrepreneurs feel as supported as those in downtown Toronto, Vancouver or Calgary.

However, this vision also depends on the involvement of local

businesses, allies and community organizations. As Alberta's McDine puts it, the goal is not simply for queer people to *survive* in business, but to *thrive*. That takes membership, participation, collaboration and a growing "choir of voices" across Canada.

And so, as new chambers emerge and existing ones continue to evolve, one message rings true from coast to coast: When local businesses get involved — when they join their provincial chamber, attend events, mentor others or simply show up — great things happen.

They help build a stronger queer economy. They help entrepreneurs feel seen and supported. And they help shape a more inclusive, innovative and connected Canada for all. ■

Reach out to connect with the CQCC or the queer chambers closest to you at **Connect with Canada's Queer Chambers** or

Queer Business BC

Queer Business BC
hello@queerbusinessbc.com

Alberta 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce

Alberta 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber Of Commerce | Alberta
2SLGBTQI+ Chamber Of Commerce
info@ab-lgbt.com

Saskatchewan Queer Entrepreneurs + Professionals

SQEP - SK's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce
hello@sqepbiz.ca

Manitoba Queer Chamber of Commerce

Manitoba Queer Chamber of Commerce
info@mbqueerchamber.ca

Ontario Queer Chamber of Commerce

Home | Ontario's Queer Chamber of Commerce
info@oqcc.ca

Chambre De Commerce LGBT du Quebec

Entrepreneuriat LGBT québécois - Chambre de commerce LGBT
info@cclgbtq.org

Queer Atlantic Business Hub | Centre D'Affaires Queer De L'Atlantique

Queer Atlantic Business Hub | Project of Sea Change
info@seachangecolab.com

Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce

CQCC: Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce
office@queerchamber.ca

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BRIDGING THE GAP

Energy Sector Inclusion Strategies Leaving Field Workers Behind

By Dr. Ting-Fai Yu

Photos by modernphotography.ca

On a cold morning, Avery, a Two-Spirit worker, watched co-workers step around a freshly painted rainbow crosswalk at the jobsite gate. The message was clear: diversity might be celebrated at head office, but it was to be avoided in the field.

When Clara completed her pre-use inspection of a lift at a jobsite, she found something alarming: someone had loosened all the bolts on one of the wheels. “If I didn’t do that pre-use inspection and

let’s say I was elevated when the wheel fell off, I would have been incredibly hurt, if not worse,” the trans electrician said in an interview. This wouldn’t be simply a matter of negligence; it was an act of intentional sabotage following her coming out at work.

These stories form the core of Empowering 2SLGBTQIA+ Workers in Energy, a national project led by Pride at Work Canada, with funding from Women and Gender Equality

Canada. Our goal was simple: listen carefully to what 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals have to say about the sector, especially in field-based and skilled-trades roles, and turn their experiences into practical actions that improve safety in workplaces, whether in offices or in the field.

Between January and June 2025, we interviewed 31 participants across Canada, including field workers, union representatives, HR and DEI managers, Employee

Resource Group leaders, business executives and community organizers. We focused on operational workers: people who climb buildings, operate plants, live in work camps and repair infrastructure in remote areas, often with limited connectivity and long absences from home.

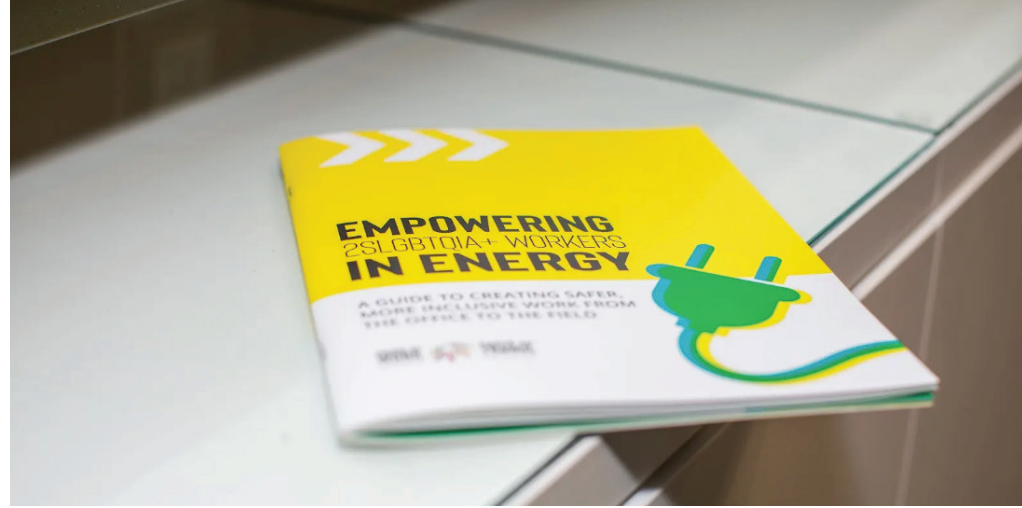
What we heard was consistent and troubling. Every 2SLGBTQIA+ worker in our study reported homophobia or transphobia at work. On job sites in particular, this ranged from homophobic jokes and microaggressions to targeted sexual harassment and violent threats. For Two-Spirit, trans and non-binary workers, the risk of outright violence was especially severe. These are not isolated incidents; they reflect a culture shaped by heteronormativity, cisnormativity and a specific notion of hyper-masculinity and toughness that views difference as weakness.

OFFICE VS. JOBSITE ENVIRONMENT DYNAMICS

However, the main point of the project is not just that field sites



Dr. Ting-Fai Yu
Researcher & Program Coordinator, Energy
Pride at Work Canada



are hostile. It is that our current, office-centric approach to DEI is structurally incapable of reaching the places where risk is greatest. Most DEI strategies are built around white-collar assumptions: 9-to-5 schedules, computer access, digital communication and training offered through webinars or learning platforms. That might work for a small part of the workforce based at head office, but it does very little for the majority working in the field, on shifts or in camps.

One participant, a Two-Spirit worker, described organizing Pride events and learning sessions at their site. “Whenever we’ve hosted events, it’s very heavy on the staff side; it’s all the salaried folks,” they explained. “A lot of those hourly folks (tradespeople and operators) can’t just leave the control panel.”

Their account captured how a seemingly inclusive initiative can produce a two-tier system: inclusion for those with flexibility, exclusion for those keeping operations running.

Communication channels deepen this divide. Many field workers don’t have internet access on jobsites, can’t join virtual town halls and rely on paper bulletins,

safety huddles and word of mouth for information. One ERG leader told us that she knows there is “a significant queer population” among field crews, but her group has almost no way to reach them directly. “I can’t send them an email directly or communicate about an event, opportunity or offer them a way to feel included in the direction of DEI at work,” she said. “That results in a lack of feedback and engagement with a specific employee base to determine what they need or what their challenges are.”

The outcome is one of performative inclusion. On paper, many energy employers have anti-harassment policies, Pride campaigns and corporate DEI strategies. In practice, the field is where actual protections are weakest and where workers most often feel that reporting harassment is pointless or dangerous. Several participants had left jobs or the sector entirely after being told that the “real problem” was that they were open about who they are. Others quietly asked for layoffs so they could escape hostile environments. Every time that happens, the industry loses skilled talent it cannot afford to lose.

CREATING SAFER AND TRUSTING OPERATIONS AS A PRIMARY GOAL

Our research also establishes a clear business case. Normalized harassment and hyper-vigilance are not just “culture” issues; they pose safety risks. When a worker is scanning for slurs on the bathroom wall or wondering who loosened the bolts on their lift, they are not fully focused on high-hazard tasks. Participants linked identity-based harassment to near-misses, injuries and mental-health crises. Employers who address these issues are not merely being “nice”; they are reducing incident risk, improving retention and strengthening compliance with human rights and occupational health and safety laws.

So, what does building DEI for the field look like? The best-practice guide from this project outlines eight areas of action, including jobsite-specific training, low-tech communication strategies, inclusive infrastructure, stronger enforcement, formalized ERGs as equity partners and targeted mentorship and sponsorship for 2SLGBTQIA+ talent.

Essentially, the most effective solutions are those that decentralize DEI and integrate it into daily operations: regional champions who are part of local teams, inclusion scenarios incorporated into toolbox talks, all-gender washrooms regarded as essential safety infrastructure and reporting systems that workers actually trust. When



“

Whenever we’ve hosted events, it’s very heavy on the staff side; it’s all the salaried folks.

”

these are established, ERGs and community networks can shift from crisis response to genuine community-building and thriving leadership.

Energy employers are confronting a significant generational shift. Younger workers are more likely to identify as 2SLGBTQIA+ and across generations there is growing insistence that psychological safety and values alignment are non-negotiable at work. If the sector continues to depend on

office-focused DEI initiatives while neglecting field workers, it will keep losing the very talent it needs for a just and equitable energy transition.

Our research shows another path is possible. When companies design with an understanding of the field realities – the schedules, risks, cultures and communities – they do more than protect 2SLGBTQIA+ workers. They build safer, more trusted and more resilient operations for everyone who steps onto the jobsite. ■



QUEER BUSINESSES GOING GLOBAL

New Trade Missions Set to Accelerate Inclusive Economic Growth in 2026

By Reggie Lemaire Costa

Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs are entering a new era of global opportunities.

As international markets open doors for certified suppliers, 2026 is shaping up to be a milestone year for Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce's Global program.

With a full slate of upcoming domestic and international trade missions, Canadian queer businesses will have more pathways than ever to access new markets and expand their growth and global reach.

CQCC has led trade missions since 2018 when the organization hosted Canada's first-ever international LGBTQI+ delegation. These missions have allowed more than 100 Canadian delegates and more than 60 Canadian

suppliers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to build relationships abroad.

The 2026 cycle carries on with a renewed focus on export readiness, inclusive economic development and connecting Canadian SMEs to a rapidly growing global ecosystem of diverse chambers of commerce.

Cass Elliott, manager of the Global program at CQCC, explains: "Canada is entering a moment where global engagement really matters. With Prime Minister Mark Carney's goal of doubling Canada's non-U.S. exports by 2030, our communities have a real opportunity to lead."

"These missions are built to help 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs step confidently into that global space and claim their share of the growth ahead."



A NEW WAVE OF TRADE MISSIONS

The next program cycle will feature a series of missions to major Canadian and international markets, offering delegates a dynamic mix of B2B matchmaking, curated networking, market briefings and sector-specific insights.

Destinations include France, Japan, Taiwan, Brazil and Colombia, each selected for its economic potential and strong partnerships within the Global program's international network.

"We design these missions to move people from possibility to momentum — because when you're in the room, doors start opening," Elliott says.

For entrepreneurs, the experience can be transformative. Murielle Bien-Aimé, CEO of La Maison Komandō and past delegate, reflects: "My first trade mission taught me this: When you step into a new market with purpose, your vision expands.

"You meet real connectors, you build a solid network and somewhere along the way you start becoming one yourself."

At the heart of these missions is CQCC's commitment to helping Canadian 2SLGBTQI+-owned businesses navigate the complexities of international trade.

Delegates gain practical insights on approaching new markets, connecting with local and multinational buyers and identifying concrete export opportunities.

Many also benefit from the Export Readiness Training program, a modular course designed to equip entrepreneurs with the skills and knowledge they need before taking the leap abroad.

As one participant shared after attending the Mexico City trade mission: "Attending a trade mission, even to explore how feasible a new market might be, is a no-brainer for entrepreneurs who want to forge a new path, leverage the Canadian brand and embrace new forms of success."

A GROWING INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

These missions build on years of deepening partnerships with 2SLGBTQI+ chambers of commerce around the world, including in Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Europe, the United States and more.

Through this network, Canadian SMEs access market insights, introductions to potential collaborators and pathways to procurement opportunities in emerging and established markets.

Recent trade missions have demonstrated the impact of this model: At last year's Mexico mission, Canadian delegates participated in more than 80 B2B meetings, generated over 150 business leads and connected with over 100 diversity-focused corporate partners at the Pride Connection México Summit.

Randy Boissonnault, president of Superbia Group and program participant, shared the value of these connections: “I have nine solid contacts from this trade mission. Five of these are important contacts at the embassy, including the ambassador and the head of the trade section. These contacts have already led to corporate opportunities and follow-ups with Invest in Canada.”

In Brazil and New York, delegates highlighted how global 2SLGBTQI+ business forums allowed them to pitch to buyers they would never have met on their own.

The 2026 missions continue this trajectory, designed not only to connect entrepreneurs to buyers, but to help them understand the broader economic and cultural landscape they’re stepping into.

Whether joining market briefings from Canadian embassies abroad or networking with local SMEs, participants gain insights that go far beyond a simple introduction.

“ **We design these missions to move people from possibility to momentum — because when you’re in the room, doors start opening.** ”

WHY TRADE MISSIONS MATTER

For many Canadian 2SLGBTQI+-owned businesses, accessing global markets isn’t just about scaling, it’s about visibility, representation and economic resilience.

“Canada needs to diversify not just where we trade as a country but also who gets to trade,” says Boissonnault, who also serves as Member of Parliament - Edmonton Centre. “Support from the federal government is critical to opening markets for 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs.”

Programs such as CQCC’s help level the playing field by connecting diverse-owned SMEs with the same international opportunities that larger companies often access more easily. Travelling as a group with the full backing of the embassy and CQCC, alongside financial support, is a game-changer for delegates seeking new markets.



By supporting these businesses, Canada strengthens its position as a leader in inclusive trade. It also builds bridges that foster long-term collaboration between nations and communities committed to economic empowerment, human rights and equality.

WHAT 2026 HOLDS

As trade missions ramp up, CQCC is eager to spotlight the entrepreneurs who will shape this next chapter. The upcoming missions aim to showcase Canadian innovation across sectors, from tech to manufacturing, consulting to consumer goods and to open doors for businesses ready to think globally.

More details on registration, eligibility, and dates are available on the CQCC website (queerchamber.ca). Applications for the France and Japan missions open in February 2026, while those for Taiwan, Toronto, Colombia and Brazil will be available in March 2026.

CQCC remains committed to advancing economic inclusion and showcasing the global potential of Canada’s 2SLGBTQI+ business community. 2026 will be a pivotal year for global expansion, and Canadian queer entrepreneurs are ready to lead. ■

UPCOMING EVENTS & PROGRAMS

- **THRIVE:** Virtual Leadership Development program for 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders. Application Deadline for next cohort: Feb. 20, 2026.
- **Winter Pride:** An evening of learning and networking with other 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals and allies promoting workplace inclusion. Montréal, Feb. 17, 2026.
- **ProPride:** An engaging evening of networking and connection, dedicated to advancing 2SLGBTQIA+ rights and fostering inclusive workplaces. Coming to
 - Winnipeg, May 2026.
 - Vancouver, July 2026.
 - Montréal, August 2026.
- **SPARK:** An exclusive, interactive event that connects business leaders with the global change makers who are driving 2SLGBTQIA+ equity forward. Toronto, November 2026.





By André Morriseau

Community Pride the Business of HIP

Old's Cool General Store Taking Care of People

Recently, I found myself on a cool fall evening in the back room of what may be the hippest store in all of East York — Old's Cool General Store. I'd been invited to sit on a jury selecting an artist to create a STREETart mural for the outside wall of the store. There I was, seated with a group of people I barely knew. All brimming with wit and art smarts, I suddenly felt a little intimidated. At a loss for words . . . and no, that is not typically a problem for me.

As a gay man from the 1970s jettisoned into the 21st century who never came out of the closet because I was never afforded the luxury of being in, supporting gay businesses is an honour. Old's Cool that evening, for me, felt like old friends with a lot of really extraordinary things . . . for sale!

This wasn't just any meeting. This was a community gathering within a community gathering, tucked inside a store that looks like a general store, works like a community centre and feels like your favourite queer auntie's living room. Meanwhile, the



© Ivan Moreno s / shutterstock.com

closest I get to “hip” these days is the talk of replacing one or both of my own.

RETHINK WHAT YOU ASSUME ABOUT QUEER SMALL BUSINESS

Old's Cool General Store (OCGS) is the kind of place that forces you to rethink everything you assume about small business — especially queer small business. Founded by Zahra Dhanani and Mariko Nguyen-Dhanani, two queer women of colour, the shop proudly calls itself a “Mom and Mom shop.”

And that's exactly the energy you feel walking in: a blend of home, humour, activism and unexpected brilliance. Their

business model is simple: community first, commerce second. There was joy and passionate discussion punctuated by Zahra's loud, embracing laughter. Like a big hug of *speaking your mind*.

OCGS operates as Toronto's first so-called “Boutique Community Centre,” a term they coined not to be cute but because nothing else fit. Yes, they sell things — books, crafts, locally made goods — but the store itself is a vehicle for healing, representation and grassroots justice work. Everything on the shelves is really just scaffolding for the real business at hand: taking care of people.

And people show up. OCGS has built a hyper-local movement anchored in trust, connection and inclusiveness. Zahra and Mariko have nurtured a neighbourhood where folks know they can come in, be seen, be heard and be supported. Their philosophy is beautifully simple: if you take care of community, the community will take care of you.

MORE THAN \$60,000 RAISED FOR ANISHINAABE HEALTH TORONTO

That philosophy shows up in how they engage with the world. Since 2016 — long before most of Toronto even knew what the orange shirt symbolized — OCGS has raised more than \$60,000 for Anishinaabe Health Toronto through their Orange Shirt Campaign.

They've also worked directly in local schools to educate students on Canada's colonial legacy. This is not performative allyship; this is long-haul, boots-on-the-ground relational work.

Then there's their annual "Black Santa" event — free, joyful, representation-centred and the only one of its kind in Canada. Families from across the GTA flock to East York so their kids can see a Santa that looks like them.

OCGS also doesn't hesitate to step into the messy work of anti-racism. When white supremacist graffiti appeared in the neighbourhood, they helped co-found East Enders Against Racism and launched their now-iconic "Everyone Belongs" campaign. They've distributed



“ You can be a general store and still be the place ‘where everybody knows your name.’ ”

more than 5,000 anti-hate lawn signs — turning ordinary front yards into declarations of solidarity.

AN UNOFFICIAL SUPPORT HUB

However, the real power of OCGS lies in the everyday moments. The store has become an unofficial support hub where parents seek guidance on trans inclusion at school, where underhoused neighbours come for help and where families navigate crises both big and small. Much of this work is unseen and entirely unpaid — but absolutely essential.

Even their outdoor space tells the story. Together with neighbours, they depaved 700 square feet of concrete to create the Gathering Garden — a green pocket of wellness, mutual aid and community resilience. It stands as

a reminder that when you remove what's hard and cold, something living can take root.

Through all of this, OCGS is quietly building a case study in queer business sustainability. Zahra and Mariko are proving that financial stability and community building are not mutually exclusive. You can run a small business that pays the bills and changes the world. You can be a general store and still be the place “where everybody knows your name.”

And if you're lucky — on a cool fall evening — you might even find yourself in their back room, discovering that hip isn't an age thing after all. It's a community thing. And at Old's Cool General Store, business and community aren't separate — they're the same. ■

Looking for Proudly Inclusive Businesses? Explore QBiz.ca Today!

QBiz.ca is your trusted resource for discovering 2SLGBTQI+-friendly businesses and services across Canada. Whether you're a consumer, a professional, or an ally—this is where community meets commerce with pride.

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Maybe you have a family member or friend that just came out, you're visiting somewhere new or relocating across the country - QBiz.ca is where you can learn more about Canada's LGBTQ+ friendly businesses and organizations.

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Welcome to Canada's 2SLGBTQIA+ Friendly Community.



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Offer good for a limited time. Coupon code expires January 30, 2026

