ISSUE 1 2026

QBiz

2SLGBTQI+ BUSINESS IN CANADA

PRIDE IS GOOD MEDICINE

THIS DOCTOR'S VISION FOR INCLUSIVE HEALTH CARE

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The Critical Need for Inclusive Systems & Tech Literacy in Economy

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Published by:
davis media company

63 Albert St., Ste. 601
Winnipeg, MB R3B 1G4
Phone: 888-705-8870
www.davismediaco.com

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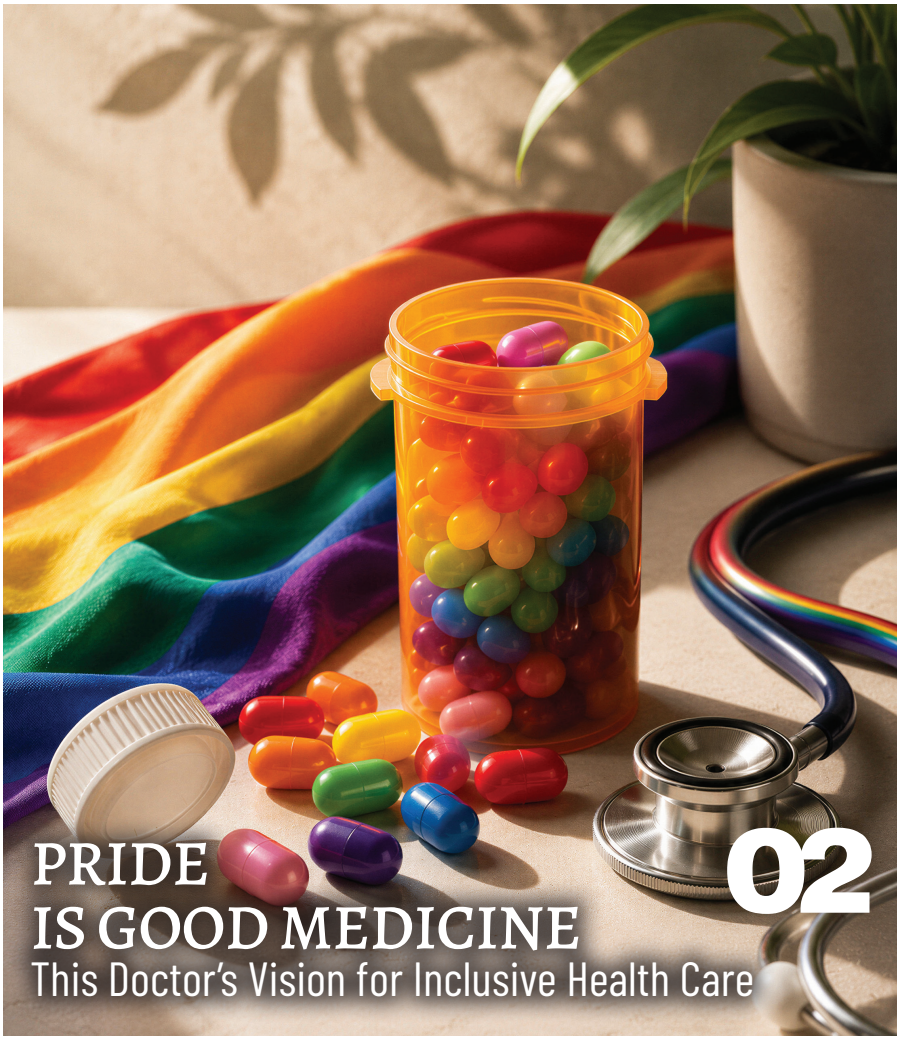
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Published July 2026

Publications Mail Agreement # 43361037

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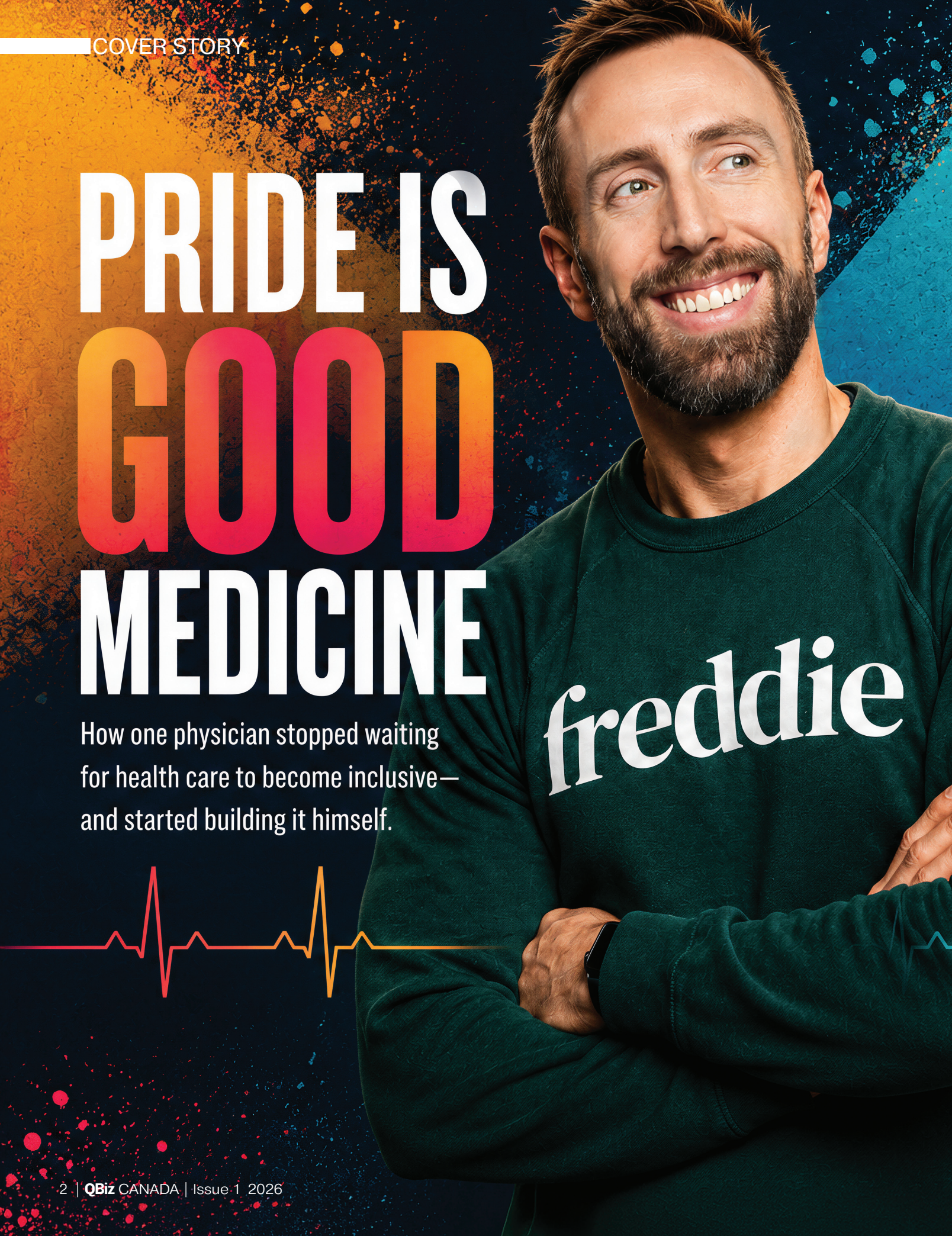
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PRIDE IS GOOD MEDICINE

How one physician stopped waiting for health care to become inclusive—and started building it himself.





By Linda Slobodian

Proposing to revise a course was a bold move for a student just a couple of months into his first year of medical school at the University of Calgary.

"There was one course case example so stereotypically like 'gay gets HIV,' it was so poorly written and so poorly reflective, and I can honestly say a bit discriminatory," said Dr. Caley Shukalek, who, as a determined student in 2011, approached the undergraduate medical education office with his concern.

"I didn't go about it like 'Let's protest against the med school.' It was an honest 'I see what you're trying to do but I think it could be better. I want to help fix it.' I didn't jump in thinking 'I know how to fix every other kind of identity stereotype in the curriculum.' Certainly, I could comment on it, but I didn't have the lived experience," said Shukalek.

The backing and approval to move forward were a foundational moment that helped to shape the trajectory of Shukalek's career.

I GOT TIRED OF BANGING MY HEAD AGAINST A WALL TRYING TO WORK WITHIN SYSTEMS.

SO I MADE MY OWN.

— DR. CALEY SHUKALEK

Photography Courtesy of **PurposeMed**

"I became a de facto mentor for queer trainees, anyone in the community in medical training and whatnot, just because I was so outspoken about myself and wanting things just to be better."

Shukalek holds a Master of Public Health from Johns Hopkins University, an MD from the University of Calgary and a Master of Science from the University of Alberta. He has long been dedicated to improving medical access and services for the 2SLGBTQI+ community.

"So, I'm gay. It's not a defining feature of my life. There are so many things that make me me. At the same time, I'm also so fiercely proud of being part of the community. I think it so much formed who I am as a person," he said. "I'm a cis man, white, I have a good career and I had ample opportunity with my parents, middle class and getting an education and all that sort of stuff."

This "privilege" made him determined to put himself in "other people's shoes" and understand "what people live through."

"I think it has formed how I am as a physician and how I care for people. But it also formed so much how I interact with people from a business perspective, from a leadership perspective and mentorship of employees, of staff, of medical trainees and other students," he said.

He has helped advance more inclusive medical education and ways for physicians and learners to better support what he said is an underserved 2SLGBTQI+ community. He has worked extensively in HIV prevention, sexual health and health-system innovation.

Shukalek serves as chief medical officer with PurposeMed, a Canadian health technology company established in 2019 with three units: Freddie for sexual health, Frida for mental health and Foria for gender-affirming care. Primarily offering virtual services to patients without "waiting rooms and judgments," PurposeMed expands access to HIV prevention, adult ADHD care and gender-affirming care. It strives to ensure health-care services are available regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, geography or social circumstance.

In 2024, Shukalek received the Canadian Medical Association's Young Leaders (Early Career) Award for his work supporting the 2SLGBTQI+ community. Accomplishments cited include his role in drafting and revising a more inclusive medical





school curriculum at the U of C; developing recommendations to better support 2SLGBTQI+ physicians and medical learners through his research; and developing a pilot overnight on-call service during the COVID-19 pandemic at Calgary's Foothills Medical Centre and Peter Lougheed Centre. That service is now replicated within other Canadian medical departments.

Shukalek's advice to young queer individuals on cultivating their leadership skills is grounded in personal experience.

"It's always easier to be successful in something you're passionate about. So, if you find that passion or chase those passions, no matter what they are, that's the first point."

However, passion must be accompanied by flexibility, drive and being true to one's authentic self, he said.

"There are things that are teachable and things that are more difficult. If you're authentic and if you're passionate about an area and that passion creates drive, those are the unteachable things. You'll find yourself being successful."

"You don't have to be the smartest person in the room," said Shukalek, stressing that along the journey, "people take breaks and people make mistakes and we all mess up here and there."

He has set his "own measure" of what success means to him. "I'm that person who regularly creates a list in my head. Like 'What do I want to accomplish, what do I want to do,' that sort of thing."

"A lot of things that have happened in my life, I stumbled upon them or had access to them. I have had a lot of privilege. I've had this willingness to lean into opportunities that present themselves. They've snowballed into these amazing opportunities that I have been able to be a part of," he added.

"I don't believe that any of my successes are solely of my doing. I've just been surrounded by the most amazing people, mentors and colleagues and friends and my husband."

He offered another sterling bit of advice to those who experience success. "It's never bad to have a bit of humility mixed in there because nobody likes a show-off. That's an instant detractor for me. Ego – I'm not a fan of it."

Acknowledgment of Shukalek's contributions reaches beyond the CMA.

"Dr. Shukalek advocates for and promotes inclusion and diversity in his clinical and academic endeavours, leadership roles and community advocacy. He is an effective role model and mentor for many within the medical community in Calgary, particularly in the area of 2SLGBTQ+ health," said Dr. Jayna M. Holroyd-Leduc, head of the department of medicine at the University of Calgary.

"His leadership and scholarly contributions to the 2SLGBTQ+ community have been recognized locally and nationally. His work also includes public outreach, such as having been involved in the development and dissemination of the 2020 Government of Alberta 'Aging with Pride: A Guide to Creating Inclusive Services for LGBTQ2S+ Older Adults.'"

She added: "Dr. Shukalek's clinical and academic activities include a focus on improving the care provided to those dealing with sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. He has worked to make treatment of HIV more accessible to all and is interested in addressing ongoing racial disparity among HIV transmission risk-factor subgroups in Canada."

Shukalek said the "Aging with Pride" guide was written to address issues queer seniors face when they enter facilities — lodges, long-term and senior-care centres — with predominantly heterosexual residents.

"Queer seniors sometimes put themselves back in the closet when they enter into shared living because of the fear of discrimination and being outed or ostracized in that seniors' living facility. I think there's still a lot of homophobia and discrimination in people of that generation," he said.


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The guidelines were created for staff and administration of facilities to ensure they are representing and promoting "openness and acceptance."

There are fewer gay men in this age demographic because "so many were lost to HIV and AIDS at a time before we had effective treatments," Shukalek said.

"Care facilities aren't used to seeing patients being treated for HIV or even transgender people and their hormones. It was providing them a bit of context and advice; mostly what not to worry about 'cause there aren't a lot of things to worry about."

HIV, which can't be cured but can be treated, still "carries a lot of stigmas" and certainly if left untreated can lead to AIDS.

"Unfortunately, certain communities, certain populations are more affected. We continue to see new HIV infections in Canada that for the last several years have been increasing, not decreasing. I'm going to say it right out: it's some inaction by government. Or maybe their wrong actions."

Higher rates are still seen among gay men, but also among Indigenous people and "heterosexual transmission in Canada at rates we've never seen before."

Fearing discrimination or feeling unwelcome in health-care settings deters people from seeking care. "That leads to diagnoses or infections going undiagnosed, untreated and then spread. Transmission happens from there."

Shukalek adds: "When we suppress someone's virus with medications, they will not transmit the virus sexually and probably not through any means. Then we also have great medications for prevention or HIV PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), which has been a huge part of my research and leadership work over the last few years in creating, helping form a company and launching virtual health services and HIV prevention sexual health."

Shukalek says sexually transmitted infections play a role right through to the transmission of HIV. "I work in HIV/STI space as a physician and as a researcher. I got tired of banging my head against a wall trying to work within systems and so I made my own. And that's actually where PurposeMed and Freddie came in. I was 'Well, if you won't let me build it, I'll build it myself.'"

Freddie fills a gap in sexual health risk reduction for persons at risk of HIV infection. Frida offers rapid diagnosis and treatment for adult attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which is undiagnosed in about 50 per cent of cases. Shukalek himself was diagnosed with ADHD as a youth.

"ADHD is different neurobiology. My brain might be wired a little bit different than what we call neurotypical or the average person's brain. It doesn't mean it doesn't work. I think in a different way," he said.

"I don't look at it as a bad thing; I just look at it as it's a fact. I'm a big believer in no judgment so I don't judge myself for having this slightly different brain biology. I'm a fidgeter and I like to task-switch and do different things every 30 minutes because that actually holds my attention more than trying to focus on something for four hours straight."

Meanwhile, Shukalek said doctors are "terrible at talking about" stigmatized issues, sexual health or behaviours. "I say that with the most admiration for my colleagues I know are so smart in so many different ways. As a doctor, as a health-care professional, I just want to know everything that's relevant and important. If someone's not telling me something, I'm just not able to do my job." ■



The QueerTech team and board with Evan Solomon, minister of artificial intelligence and digital innovation

AI IS EVOLVING QUICKLY: ARE CANADIANS KEEPING UP?

The Critical Need for Inclusive Systems and Tech Literacy in the Economy

By Naoufel Testaouni, CEO, QueerTech

From the dot-com era to the rise of social media, technological innovation has routinely outpaced the systems meant to regulate these technologies and mitigate harm. We've already seen attempts to patch harmful technologies once they've been deployed — from Facebook's data scandal of 2018 to Twitter's moderation incident in 2022.

The tendency to innovate first and safeguard later isn't just a policy oversight in Canada; these trends create real risk for underrepresented communities, including 2SLGBTQI+ people who are disproportionately targeted by disinformation campaigns, doxxing schemes and actors using tech maliciously. Yet, it's these same technologies that have been instrumental for historically underrepresented communities in gaining new access and visibility to community, resources and opportunity.

It is within this paradox — the idea that these tools create visibility, access and community, while simultaneously increasing vulnerability — that the true level of risk becomes clear. As we enter an era of artificial intelligence and other exponential, autonomous technologies, the impacts of incomplete regulation and habits of permitting profitability over public protection will be felt acutely by all Canadians at an unprecedented scale.

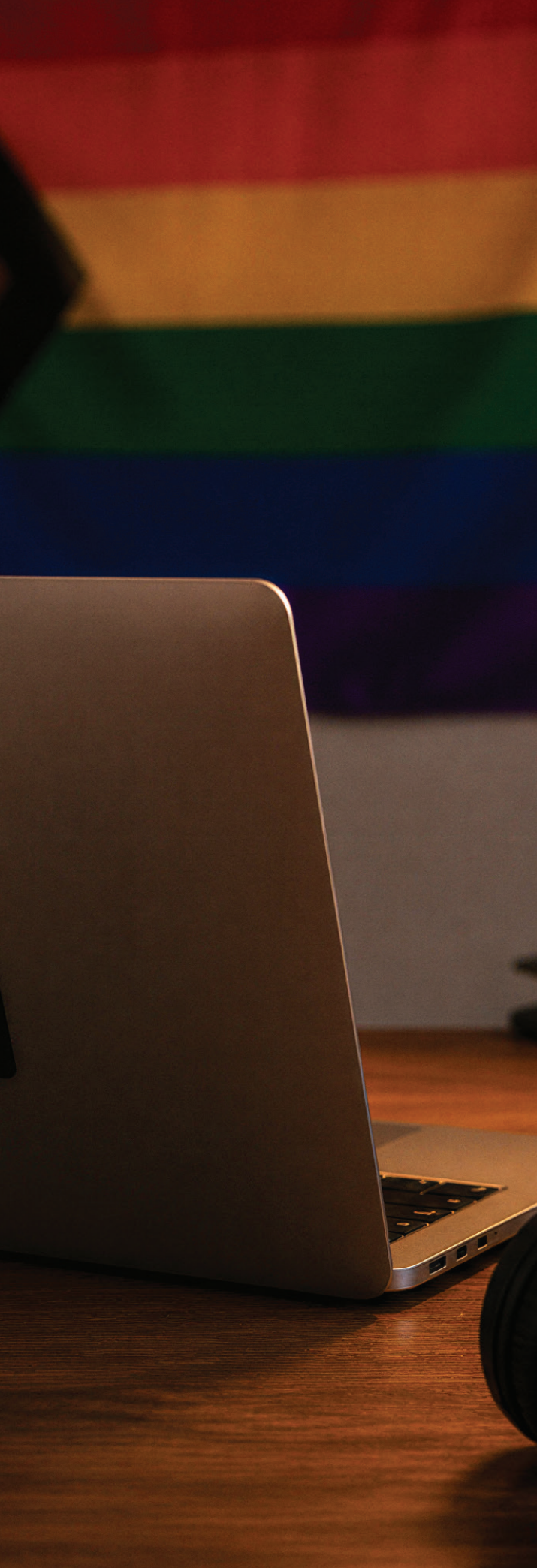
About QueerTech

QueerTech is a national nonprofit advancing 2SLGBTQI+ talent, entrepreneurship and inclusive technology across Canada's tech ecosystem.

Through community-led programming, original research, strategic partnerships and actionable inclusion tools, QueerTech builds pathways into tech and helps shape a more responsible and equitable technology industry.

The organization is also a national leader in responsible technology advocacy and progressive 2SLGBTQI+ equity and inclusion policy facilitation.





THE QUEER-FOCUSED SOLUTION TO HARMFUL AI

As advancement and adoption trends continue to proliferate Canadian technologies and society, and as exponential functionality increasingly influences economic and social outcomes, the need for responsible and inclusive AI development has become critical. Without intentional action, automated systems are capable of hard-wiring blind spots, hard-coding bias and amplifying existing inequalities at an exponential scale.

That's why QueerTech launched the QT Inclusive AI Initiative. This national initiative is designed to address these challenges directly, advancing a more inclusive and responsible approach across the AI life cycle — from design and development to deployment and utilization. Through this initiative, our work is positively contributing to two interconnected areas of national concern:

1. **The cost of exclusion.** Canada cannot afford the cost of fragmented, inefficient and under-operationalized technologies and systems. Inclusive development is innovative development; directly equating to improved international competitiveness, workforce resilience and equitable prosperity.
2. **If tech isn't safe for everyone, it isn't safe.** Public trust, safety and agency are all at risk if advanced systems continue to make decisions and determinations for Canadians. Underrepresented communities will feel the harm of exclusive tech first, but the general population won't be far behind.

CLARIFYING THE PROBLEM AND EMPOWERING CANADIANS

Let's be real for a second. The sheer quantity of information online, the disheartening news cycles of the last few years and the amount of worry we are all exposed to on a daily basis aren't helping the AI and data literacy problem. How are Canadians supposed to understand the issue deeply enough to care, feel confident enough to act and maintain that knowledge level in order to keep up with the quick evolution of these technologies?

That's where QueerTech can help. We intimately understand that the world of AI is nuanced, complex and largely hidden from the general public in terms of how it is designed and deployed. It's our job to simultaneously increase literacy so both the general public and 2SLGBTQI+ tech professionals can navigate the world of advanced AI safely and confidently while also helping to remove the noise and stress associated with identifying and implementing solutions to address these harmful systems.

Ready for your crash course?



Preview of the research report at the QueerTech/CQCC event

WHAT IS AI?

At its core, AI is a sophisticated statistical engine that replaces rigid, human-coded logic with the ability to autonomously identify patterns within vast datasets. While this makes it incredibly powerful for automating tasks that once required human intuition and action, it remains a system of mathematical probabilities rather than a conscious entity. Because AI lacks grounded cognition (meaning it doesn't have a body or a life to anchor its knowledge), it can simulate human language and logic without ever truly understanding the reality of the experiences it's processing. Essentially, it's a masterful imitator of the human world, operating entirely without true, lived understanding.

AI functions on binary computing systems — the same system your family computer in 1995 ran on. The issue with that? We are deploying and using AI as if it's capable of complex, abstract human thought and understanding when, in reality, it is solely equipped to process binary information (0 or 1 logic, yes or no). For 2SLGBTQI+ identifying people, this is critical. If the technology we are using is fundamentally incapable of understanding, respecting and reflecting our identities, how can we expect the same system to make equitable decisions and treat us fairly?

HOW POWERFUL IS AI, REALLY?

Data and AI go hand-in-hand. AI systems cannot be developed or improved without access to massive amounts of information. To give you a sense of data scale in 2026, consider this: Over 90 per cent of all data that exists from human history (i.e., every book, newspaper, census, etc., ever written) was generated in the last two years. Humans now create the equivalent of 38,000 4K movies every second and five million copies of every book ever written, every single day.

This scale is staggering, but it begins to paint an accurate picture. AI systems have access to enormous amounts of data, from both public and private sources. These systems are then capable of using this information to make millions of autonomous decisions and micro-actions, largely requiring no human intervention or permission. Today, ChatGPT alone handles approximately 2.5 billion prompts a day, each triggering 30 million microscopic decisions.

And these systems are only getting more powerful. Recently, Anthropic's new model caused a rush by industry and government to quickly address defence practices prior to its launch, with experts saying the model's capability is currently stronger than the majority of defence practices relating to malicious cyber attacks.

IS AI RISKY?

Yes, it poses risk from multiple perspectives.

QueerTech's latest research has uncovered that while 97 per cent of tech companies say inclusive AI is a high priority, 43 per cent reported very limited or non-existent processes for addressing bias — in any way — in their development practices. Further, 71 per cent said the same for the level of organizational support they receive relating to equitable representation in their systems. We also saw 77 per cent of developers report that addressing 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion in their work was very difficult, with less than half believing their company's AI products meet the needs of queer users.

Affirming the idea that tech serves whoever builds it, these findings reveal a technology ecosystem that champions inclusion optically while failing to operationalize it in practice — whether due to persistent knowledge gaps shaped by historically homogenous workforces or incentives that continue to prioritize speed, scale and profit over accountability.

Here are a few examples of real-world harm cases: stereotypes in image systems, bias in ranking job applicants, AI-powered scams.

THE INITIATIVE: TOOLS AND WAYS TO IMPROVE

The QT Inclusive AI Initiative acts as QueerTech's strategic foundation, guiding our research, industry programming and national collaborations around inclusive tech.

The initiative also provides dedicated learning opportunities, practical tools and collaborative spaces to help organizations create more responsible AI systems, and practitioners use these advanced systems safely:

- **AI Readiness Assessments:** Instant inclusion scores and reports to evaluate organizational maturity and governance practices.
  Two tools:
  - AI developers and product teams
  - HR and people teams

- **Inclusive AI Content and Curriculum:** Various formats of tailored education, to build practical literacy around responsible AI development, deployment and use.

- **Community Dialogues:** Facilitated spaces to co-create inclusive AI standards with our community, practitioners, tech companies and regulators.
  - QT Connect Meetups: Local, quarterly events with focused discussions contributing to a regional needs index.
  - Tailored Events: Roundtables, community circles and more, designed to start and advance collaborative solutions to exclusive AI systems.
  - QT Qonference (QTQ): The culmination of the 2026 QT Inclusive AI Initiative discussion: Who Gets to Trust AI? Power, Participation and Accountability. We're welcoming over 700 2SLGBTQI+ tech professionals to connect, learn and celebrate.

- **Practical Toolkits:** Helping organizations turn inclusive principles into operational practices and responsible governance.
  - QT Digital Community: The hub to access all QT Inclusive AI Initiative resources and tools. It's free, secure and easy to use.
  - QueerTech Research: First-of-its-kind national research; benchmarking the perceptions and practices of inclusive development across the industry and utilization in high-risk business functions such as HR.
    - **Inclusive AI Development:** Benchmarking Canada's Tech Industry Report.
    - **Inclusive AI Utilization in HR:** Benchmarking Canada's Tech Industry Report (Launched June 2026).

- **Communities of Practice:** The "action" element of community dialogues, supporting the acceleration of inclusive frameworks and shared standards across the ecosystem.



The QueerTech board with the QT inclusive AI logo and slogan

WRAP-UP

Through this initiative, QueerTech aims to train 600 HR professionals to assess representation gaps and implement inclusive practices across people teams, educate 400 AI product managers and developers on algorithmic biases and responsible practices and empower non-profit leaders to strengthen digital governance and AI-informed leadership. Together, we will impact over 2,500 2SLGBTQI+ professionals while helping millions of Canadian AI users avoid exposure to harmful stereotypes and misinformation.

The window for shaping inclusive, responsible AI is open right now, but it won't stay open for long. We must choose to embed accessibility, equity and accountability into the foundations of AI systems before harmful patterns harden into industry standards. Technology inevitably reflects the priorities and opinions of its architects. When design processes are not inclusive, the failures are predictable: eroded public trust, widespread harm and a stagnant industry lacking in sustainable, resilient innovation.

Canada's AI future will be defined by what we choose to normalize and incentivize now. Ultimately, Canada must define a standard of innovation it is proud to stand behind and prepared to defend. These parameters of responsible innovation also need to clearly identify the threshold below which tech companies — through lack of accountability and non-transparent practices — become a liability to long-term competitiveness, public trust and Canada's innovation economy. ■



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BEYOND THE FLAG

What 2SLGBTQI+ Consumers Are Actually Looking For

By Scott Cameron

There is a version of this article you have already read. It talks about buying power. It tells companies to update their websites in June, sponsor a float and train their staff on pronouns. Then it congratulates everyone for being inclusive.

That isn't this article

The businesses that are actually earning loyal 2SLGBTQI+ customers are not winning on the strength of a rainbow flag in the window or casually displayed behind the counter. While that helps, they are winning because they have figured out something more fundamental: how queer consumers make decisions and why those decisions look nothing like the models most businesses are using.

The answer lies in four interconnected thought processes that influence behaviour: safety, friction, social networks and belonging. Together, they form a decision pathway that operates well below the surface of conventional consumer behaviour.

Understanding it may be the most valuable thing any business seeking to engage with the 2SLGBTQI+ community can do right now.

STEP ONE: THE SAFETY AUDIT

Before a 2SLGBTQI+ consumer considers whether a business is good, convenient or affordable, they are asking a different question entirely.

> **Will I be safe, respected and understood here?**

It sounds simple. It is not. This question gets asked when booking a hotel, choosing a family doctor, hiring a contractor to come into the home or walking into a retail space for the first time. And unlike most consumer decisions, the default answer is not assumed. It tends to be cautious.

Consider Marcus, a gay man in his late 30s who recently relocated to a new city. Needing a family physician, he

spent nearly two weeks researching clinics before making an appointment. Not because he needed a specialist or due to the significant lack of physicians accepting new patients, but because he needed to know whether disclosing his relationship status would be met with respect or with awkward silence and an assumption reset. He eventually booked with a clinic he found through a recommendation in an online queer community group. He has not looked elsewhere since.

This is the safety audit in action. And what many businesses misunderstand is that neutral does not mean safe. A website with no inclusive language, a form that offers only Mr. or Mrs. and staff who make assumptions without thinking does not indicate safety. Status quo is a signal. Silence, in this context, is a message.

The businesses that pass the safety audit are not necessarily the ones with the most visible Pride branding. They are the ones where clear, consistent signals reduce uncertainty enough that a potential customer is willing to take the next step: inclusive intake forms, staff who do not make assumptions, a non-discrimination statement that does not read like legal boilerplate. Each of these things signals something important before a single transaction takes place.

STEP TWO: THE FRICTION TAX

Suppose a business passes the safety audit. The customer walks in, books the appointment or places the order. What happens next determines whether they ever come back.

For many 2SLGBTQI+ consumers, routine interactions carry a hidden surcharge: the cognitive and emotional cost of managing moments that most people never notice. Explaining a relationship to a service provider who assumed otherwise. Correcting a pronoun. Deciding, in a split second, whether to disclose identity or let an assumption stand. Navigating a form that has no field for their reality.

These moments are individually small. Accumulated over time, they are exhausting. And they quietly redirect spending.

> **You do not lose queer customers because of bad service. You lose them because of unnecessary effort.**

Priya, a trans woman who runs her own consulting firm, describes it plainly. She is not looking for perfection. She is looking for places where she does not have to spend energy managing the interaction. When she finds a business where things just work, where she is not educating anyone or correcting anyone or bracing for anything, she goes back. And she tells people.

This is what researchers in social capital theory call transaction costs: the cognitive and emotional energy added to exchanges when trust is absent. For businesses, reducing this friction is not just an equity issue. It is an operational one. Inclusive intake processes, thoughtful language in communications and staff who are genuinely trained rather than merely briefed represent a tangible competitive advantage. Ease creates loyalty in ways that discounts rarely do.


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STEP THREE: TRUST TRAVELS THROUGH NETWORKS

Here is where the economics get interesting.

2SLGBTQI+ consumers have long relied on informal networks to navigate a world that has not always been welcoming. Long before apps and directories, queer communities developed sophisticated systems of shared knowledge: which businesses were safe, which were not and which had quietly earned the right to be called trustworthy. These networks did not just inform individual decisions. They protected them.

That infrastructure has not disappeared. It has evolved. Community Facebook groups, Discord servers, neighbourhood apps and word-of-mouth between friends now function as powerful pre-screening systems. A recommendation from a trusted peer carries far more weight than any advertising campaign. And a warning carries further still.

> **You do not earn one queer customer. You earn or lose access to an entire network.**

A dental clinic in a mid-sized Canadian city discovered this first-hand. After one staff member consistently misgendered a non-binary patient over several appointments, the patient shared their experience in a

Scott Cameron is the founder of RainbowConnect.ca, which has been connecting 2SLGBTQI+ consumers with welcoming businesses since 2020. He joined forces with *QBiz* in 2024.



local queer community group. Within weeks, three other members had quietly switched providers. The clinic had no idea any of this was happening.

The inverse is equally true. A realtor who spent two years showing up consistently, using correct names and not making assumptions about household composition, found that nearly 40 per cent of her referrals were coming through queer community networks. She had not run a single targeted ad. She had simply been reliably good and the community had noticed.



This is social capital functioning as economic capital. Trust, once established in these networks, does not stay contained. It compounds.

STEP FOUR: THE BELONGING PREMIUM

When a business consistently delivers on safety, reduces friction and builds a reputation within trusted networks, something shifts. It stops being a vendor. It becomes a behaviour.

This is the belonging premium and it is the most powerful force in this entire decision pathway. When queer consumers find a business where they can exhale, where they do not have to translate themselves or manage their own comfort, they return. They also advocate. They bring friends. They leave reviews that mention the atmosphere, not just the product. They become, in the language of business, extraordinarily loyal customers.

Belonging is not achieved by grand gestures. It is the outcome of sustained consistency. The medical clinic that has been getting it right for three years. The accountant who asks the right questions and skips the wrong ones. The hotel or restaurant that updates its records to reflect a guest's actual name and honours it every time.

> **Queer consumers are not looking for perfection. They are looking for places where they can exhale and they reward those places with extraordinary loyalty.**

For businesses that have genuinely earned the trust of 2SLGBTQI+ consumers, the challenge is visibility. Word-of-mouth is powerful, but slow. QBiz.ca accelerates it. By connecting consumers who are ready to spend with businesses that are ready to welcome them, it collapses a process that might otherwise take years into something far more immediate.

THE REAL DECISION FRAMEWORK

Most businesses think about consumer decisions in terms of price, quality and convenience. For many 2SLGBTQI+ consumers, those factors do not even enter the equation until a different set of questions has been answered first.

Is it safe? Will it be easy? Does the community trust it? And ultimately: do I belong here?

These are not questions born from distrust of the business world. They come from experience, from a long history of having to think carefully about spaces that others take for granted.

Businesses that understand this are not just doing the right thing. They are doing the smart thing. Because the consumers who find their way to a business through this pathway and find what they were looking for on the other side of it are among the most loyal customers any business can earn.

The rainbow flag turns out to be just the beginning of the conversation. The businesses winning 2SLGBTQI+ loyalty have figured out what comes after it. ■



Participants during Montreal ProPride 2025

BUILDING QUEER FUTURES, TOGETHER

ProPride Event Series Intention Runs Deep

By Jose Patiño-Gomez, Director of Stakeholder Engagement & Advancement, Pride at Work Canada *Photos by Pride at Work Canada*

Each year, Pride at Work Canada brings professionals together across the country through our **ProPride** event series. On the surface, these gatherings might look familiar — panels, conversations, networking. However, the intention behind them runs deeper.

In 2026, ProPride returns with a renewed focus, **Building Queer Futures**. It asks a critical question: What does it take to build workplaces where 2SLGBTQI+ people can not only belong today, but help shape the future?

This theme comes at a time when conversations around inclusion are shifting. Across sectors, organizations are navigating changing expectations, evolving policies and, in some cases, increasing resistance to equity-focused work.

At the same time, 2SLGBTQI+ professionals continue to navigate workplace environments that are not always designed with their experiences in mind and where inclusion efforts have been reduced, rebranded or eliminated in recent years.

In that context, spaces that bring people together intentionally — and with a clear purpose — take on added significance.

MORE THAN A MOMENT OF CONNECTION

ProPride was created back in 2008 to offer something that is often missing in professional networking spaces: The opportunity to connect across roles, industries and lived experiences while grounding those connections in shared understanding as Two-Spirit, queer and trans people.

What makes these gatherings meaningful is not simply the chance to meet others, but the context in which those connections happen.



Winnipeg ProPride 2025

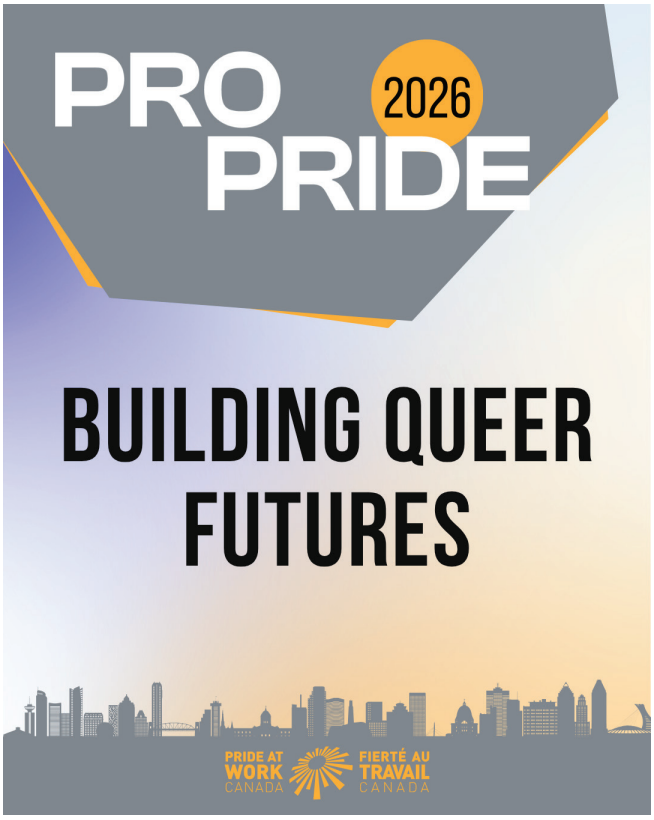
For many 2SLGBTQI+ professionals, strong internal networks do not always exist within their organizations. External spaces like ProPride can help people expand their professional circles, share strategies and build support systems that extend beyond a single employer or event.

Conversations can happen about navigating careers, building influence, addressing barriers and imagining what more inclusive workplaces can look like in practice.

These connections often extend well beyond the event itself. They can lead to mentorship, collaboration and new opportunities while also reinforcing a broader sense of belonging within a professional landscape that can still feel isolating.

There is also something powerful about visibility. To gather, to be seen and to stand alongside others carries weight — especially in a moment when our communities are facing renewed systemic attacks.

Showing up in these spaces is not only about professional development; it is also about affirming that 2SLGBTQI+ people belong in every sector, at every level and in shaping what comes next.



LEARNING IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

One of the defining features of ProPride is the way it brings together different perspectives — leaders, emerging professionals, advocates and practitioners — to explore how workplace inclusion is evolving.

This year's conversations are grounded in the reality that inclusion work does not happen in a vacuum. It is shaped by broader social, political and economic forces. The progress made over the past decade has been driven in large part by sustained advocacy and collective action — and it continues to require attention and commitment.

That matters because inclusion does not happen through isolated initiatives alone. Progress is shaped by decisions across the employee life cycle — from hiring and retention to advancement, leadership and accountability. The series focuses on practical strategies that can help organizations strengthen inclusion in more sustainable ways while also advancing intersectional equity.

For professionals, this creates both challenges and opportunities. Understanding how to navigate these shifts, how to sustain progress and how to contribute meaningfully within their own organizations is increasingly part of the conversation.

ProPride offers a space to engage with these questions — not in abstract terms, but through shared experiences and practical insight.

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, WITH A SHARED PURPOSE

ProPride 2026 took place in Winnipeg in May and virtually in June. It is scheduled for Vancouver in July, Montreal in August and Ottawa in September.

Each gathering reflects its local context — shaped by regional industries, communities and priorities — while contributing to a broader national conversation about the future of work and inclusion.

Bringing people together across these regions is part of what gives the series its impact. It creates not only space for dialogue, but also a visible and collective presence of 2SLGBTQI+ professionals across sectors and geographies.

Building queer futures is not a single conversation or a one-time event. It is an ongoing process shaped by the people who show up, share their experiences and contribute to the work of creating more inclusive workplaces.

ProPride is one place where that process becomes tangible — through dialogue, connection and the simple but powerful act of being present together. ■

To learn more, visit: www.prideatwork.ca



Tyler Boyce (The Enchanté Network), Jade Pichette (Pride at Work Canada) and Bonnie Brayton (Disabled Women's Network of Canada), appear before the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights.

MODERNIZING EMPLOYMENT EQUITY

A Defining Moment for Canada's Workforce

By Jade Pichette, Director of Programs and Advocacy, Pride at Work Canada

Photos by Pride at Work Canada

Canada's labour market is at a turning point. Amid ongoing labour shortages and increasing pressure to remain competitive, organizations are being asked to attract and retain talent in a rapidly evolving environment.

At the same time, the federal government has been working to modernize the Employment Equity Act (EEA) — a long-overdue update to legislation that has not kept pace with the realities of today's workforce.

Following the release of the Employment Equity Act Review Task Force report in late 2023, there was clear momentum toward modernization. More recently, progress has slowed, even as the need for reform has become more widely recognized across federally regulated sectors.

A FRAMEWORK THAT NO LONGER REFLECTS TODAY'S WORKFORCE

First introduced in 1986, the Employment Equity Act was designed to address systemic barriers faced by four designated groups: women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities.

While groundbreaking at the time, the framework no longer reflects the complexity of today's labour force. Broad categories have often obscured the distinct experiences of different communities, while others have remained outside the framework entirely.

As raised during Senate committee hearings on the act, when legislation does not explicitly recognize certain communities, it becomes significantly harder to measure outcomes, address barriers or ensure accountability. In practice, gaps in recognition often translate into gaps in data — and, ultimately, in action.

WHAT MODERNIZATION IS AIMING TO ADDRESS

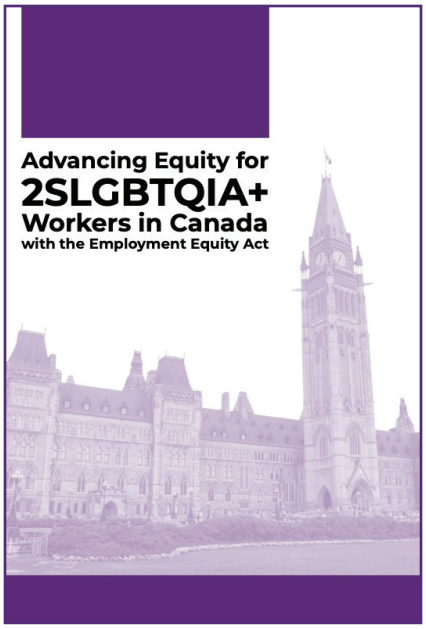
The 2023 report by the Employment Equity Act Review Task Force, which was formed in 2021, outlines a path forward to better align the act with current workforce realities and human rights standards.

Among its key recommendations is the addition of Black and 2SLGBTQI+ people as designated groups alongside women, Indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities. It also proposes updating terminology — replacing "members of visible minorities" with "racialized people" and aligning language related to Indigenous peoples — as well as bringing the definition of disability in line with the Accessible Canada Act.

Just as important is the emphasis on stronger compliance and enforcement, including improved reporting requirements and clearer accountability mechanisms.



Delegates from civil society organizations in front of Parliament Hill during Lobby Days to discuss the modernization of the Employment Equity Act.



Taken together, these changes move employment equity toward a more precise and outcomes-driven model — one that recognizes that different communities experience barriers in different ways and that addressing those barriers requires more than broad, generalized approaches.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

For many organizations, employment equity has historically been treated as a compliance exercise. Modernization begins to shift that framing.

A more robust and detailed framework — particularly one that includes Black and 2SLGBTQI+ communities — will require organizations to better understand their workforce and demonstrate progress more clearly. This is not only about meeting future regulatory expectations; it is increasingly tied to how organizations compete for talent.

Access to more meaningful data allows employers to identify where barriers exist, whether in hiring, retention or advancement. In a labour market where attracting and keeping talent remains a challenge, that level of insight becomes a practical advantage.

At the same time, stronger accountability mechanisms will place greater emphasis on outcomes. Organizations will be expected not simply to have policies in place, but to show how those policies translate into measurable change.

PREPARING FOR A MORE ACCOUNTABLE FRAMEWORK

While legislative changes have not yet been finalized, the direction is clear. Employers are likely to be working within a more data-driven, intersectional and accountable system in the near future.

Preparing for that shift starts with a closer look at existing practices. Many organizations will need to revisit how they approach voluntary and confidential self-identification, particularly in areas where data has historically been limited, such as sexual orientation, gender diversity and more disaggregated racial identities.

It also means examining internal systems — from recruitment to advancement — to better understand where barriers may persist, even unintentionally. As expectations evolve, leadership capacity will be key, with leaders needing to engage more directly with equity data and support more targeted approaches.

The modernization of the Employment Equity Act reflects years of research, consultation and advocacy across sectors. Organizations such as Pride at Work Canada have contributed to this work alongside many others, helping to shape a framework that is more reflective of today's workforce.

Yet, despite this work having started years ago, there is still a lack of government action to introduce legislation in line with their repeated commitment to modernize the act.

As Canada continues to navigate economic uncertainty and shifting global dynamics, the ability to fully leverage its talent remains central. Updating the Employment Equity Act is one part of that broader effort — ensuring that the systems used to understand and support workers are aligned with current realities.

During the last year, we've met with politicians and found some cross-party support on this issue, and we continue to follow up with the newly formed National Employment Equity Council. The recommendations are already on the table.

What follows will determine how they are implemented —and how prepared organizations are to operate within a more modern, transparent and accountable approach to employment equity. ■

To learn more, visit: www.prideatwork.ca



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QEDGE networking

CONNECTING THE DOTS

How CQCC is Helping Fuel a National Queer Entrepreneurial Network

By Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC)

Queer entrepreneurs and business owners are pillars of Canada's economy. The country's more than 100,000 2SLGBTQI+-owned businesses employ over 435,000 Canadians, with these numbers continuing to grow, bringing fresh perspectives and bold ideas to industries and sectors across the board.

But these same entrepreneurs face distinct and compounding challenges when it comes to funding and scaling their businesses, barriers that their non-queer peers simply do not encounter in the same way.

That is where queer chambers of commerce and business associations come in. These organizations exist across Canada at provincial, regional and national levels, offering vital resources to queer entrepreneurs who need them most. They give businesses a collective voice and a built-in community so no one has to navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship alone.

For years, however, these regional chambers of commerce and business associations often operated in silos, each doing vital work for queer entrepreneurs within their regional areas but rarely in concert with one another.

It was a cornerstone challenge that the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC), then known as Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce, set out to address. CQCC was selected to administer the 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Program with federal funding secured in 2023. The program was the first of its kind globally. It was designed to address longstanding gaps and systemic barriers facing queer entrepreneurs while strengthening Canada's national infrastructure for inclusive economic growth.

Looking Ahead

Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC)

Pride Month is an opportunity to reflect as much as celebrate. The support offered from traditional businesses to Pride celebrations across Canada has wavered in recent years. The termination of sponsorship deals for Pride Parades is but one of the more visible setbacks facing our broader queer community as the economy and social climate waver from progress.

But beyond the corporate-sponsored floats, real queer entrepreneurs and business owners are continuing to change the business landscape in Canada. As of 2021, they had already generated over $22 billion in business across Canada and they are not slowing down. They are essential pillars of the Canadian queer and business communities.

"One of the things that I, as a trans woman, most resent is this idea that we should only expect survival; that being queer or trans is a life of deprivation, isolation and economic uncertainty. 'Don't go that way.' . . . The research and advocacy that we do is about shifting the mindset. The systems have not always been designed with us in mind. And so, we have to think about the system problems that exist. . . . The Alberta 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce is trying to create the conditions here in Alberta for queer and trans entrepreneurs to be able to thrive, not just survive based on the subsistence from whatever the government of the day is telling us we should take."

— Elli McDine, Executive Director, Alberta 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce

The regional affiliates network exists to support these entrepreneurs. The work undertaken at provincial, regulatory and national levels by our chambers of commerce and business associations too often happens outside of the spotlight, but it is essential.

It ensures that queer business owners can connect, can speak to peers who face the same unique challenges and can build the knowledge they need to thrive as their full selves at work. This is not small work; it is game-changing work made increasingly possible by vital funding implemented over the last three years, thanks to the 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Program.

That investment has catalyzed lasting impact across the Canadian queer entrepreneurial ecosystem, with the connections and supports developed during the funding period continuing to grow stronger over time.

One of the pillars of the 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Program was the $8 million Ecosystem Fund. It supported 29 non-profit organizations across every province and territory to deliver identity-affirming programming, supports and resources for 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs. For many communities — including in northern regions, Atlantic Canada and francophone minority contexts — this represented the first time entrepreneurship programming was delivered in a way that fully affirmed 2SLGBTQI+ identities.

Through the Ecosystem Fund, CQCC was also able to help increase the capacity of regional affiliates, bringing together organizations already doing vital work in this space. By formalizing these relationships into a cohesive network, the foundation was laid for a stronger, more integrated system of support.

"If you want more entrepreneurialism and you want entrepreneurialism from people who are traditionally not represented in that community, there is infrastructure funding that can be spent to continue to support that. . . . If we want an inclusive economy here in Alberta and across Canada, and we want us all to succeed and have opportunity, that needs to have that foundational investment into the well-being of queer and trans and allied entrepreneurs."

— Elli McDine, Executive Director, Alberta 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce

CQCC's regional affiliates include the Alberta 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce, Chambre de commerce LGBT du Québec, Manitoba Queer Chamber of Commerce, Ontario Queer Chamber of Commerce, SQEP - Saskatchewan's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce, Queer Atlantic Business Hub (launched in March 2026) and Queer Business BC.

Together with CQCC, these organizations form a dedicated support system and community built specifically for queer entrepreneurs in Canada, the regional affiliate network.

THE MAKING OF A NATIONAL NETWORK

The regional affiliate network is a national partnership of organizations working together to develop opportunities and create lasting positive impact for Canadian queer entrepreneurs. Before this intentional relationship-building, regional chambers and associations often worked in isolation with limited interaction points. Many had few (if any) paid staff, sometimes limiting their capacity to grow memberships and provide sought-after programming for members and allied businesses alike.

What did creating this network look like? The CQCC established itself as a central link, ensuring that regional chambers and business associations have access to one another's contacts, networks and knowledge. They helped build relationships and collaborations by facilitating



Summit 1



Summit 2



Symposium



QEDGE group

introductions and formalizing the collaboration within a networked group of chambers and business associations.

"The Manitoba Queer Chamber of Commerce has been a longstanding member and partner of CQCC. We know that representation matters and in a country as diverse and geographically expansive as Canada, having a regional chamber is important. Being part of CQCC is important as a connection point, hearing about other regional chambers' successes, challenges, opportunities or just a time to connect."

— Matt Metcalf, Treasurer,
Manitoba Queer Chamber of Commerce

The Ecosystem Fund investment was key in building up regional capacity. Designed to support non-profit organizations across the country, the fund helped groups that provide tailored services and resources to 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs in their communities. These organizations, including regional affiliates of CQCC, were invited to submit proposals to start up or expand their work with 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs in their region.

Grant managers at CQCC supported the regional affiliates network with approved projects to build capacity and ensure funded deliverables were carried out in full. The programs developed through this funding strengthened the services and supports available to 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs in local, provincial and national communities.

"What the funding through CQCC did was essentially say, 'You have a couple of years to build in the capacity to figure things out, to connect to the right people, to figure out your mission, to build in the technical infrastructure and processes that you need to hire the people that you need to achieve that mission.' We would not have been able to do this without CQCC. It just would not have been possible."

— Elli McDine, Executive Director,
Alberta 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce

The results? One of the most important outcomes of this initiative was connection. Regional affiliates went from being isolated to actively supporting one another. Regional affiliates can now share tools and best practices, exchange ideas, mentorship models, events, vendors, formats and collaborate in organic and informal ways that signify strong and resilient relationships.

Some regional affiliates grew their membership thanks to the support of the fund and network. Regions that did not previously host events now host regular virtual events, in-person networking gatherings and community-based programming in accessible venues.

A key moment in building this cohesion between chambers was an in-person regional affiliate retreat organized during the funding period. For the first time, regional leaders, board members and staff met in



Summit 3



Summit 4

person, which was an enormous catalyst for relationship building. This built trust and alignment and created a shared sense of purpose. Many affiliate groups described the retreat as a turning point for the federal network of chambers.

THE CHALLENGES ARE REAL. SO IS THE SUPPORT.

The regional affiliates network matters because queer entrepreneurs are facing renewed challenges on multiple fronts, from economic uncertainty to a shifting social climate.

Through the 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Program's Ecosystem Fund and the connected infrastructure built to deliver it, queer chambers of commerce and business associations across Canada are now linked in ways they never were before, better positioned than ever to support queer entrepreneurs wherever they are building their businesses.

"Without CQCC, we may not have always had the opportunity to collaborate or synergize. Smaller regional chambers may not always get thought of when larger national opportunities present themselves. But, being a regional affiliate, CQCC always takes the opportunity to connect MQCC with people who may be looking at doing business in Manitoba."

— Matt Metcalf, Treasurer,
Manitoba Queer Chamber of Commerce



Through the EMERGE program delivered through the Manitoba Queer Chamber of Commerce, entrepreneurs from industries ranging from film to the trades have been able to grow and scale in meaningful ways. One filmmaker was able to launch their first film.

Another, leading a landscaping, home and garden business, spoke about how the network helped them prepare for unexpected challenges through the right business insurance, navigate conversations with anti-queer undertones and connect with other queer people thriving in the construction industry. These connections matter across every sector and the support delivered is deepening entrepreneurs' conviction as they take on the challenges of scaling.

In Quebec, the Fierté des entrepreneur.e.s 2ELGBTQI+ program delivered through the Chambre de commerce LGBT du Québec has helped queer entrepreneurs connect and professionalize across the province. One business owner working in taxation, accounting and advisory services was able to strengthen their internal systems, sharpen their value proposition and grow their client base.

Such breakthroughs rarely happen overnight and they rarely happen alone. The power of a network is that hard-won lessons can be shared, helping queer entrepreneurs scale faster and sidestep unnecessary setbacks.

That sense of community carried through in Ontario as well, where programs delivered by the Ontario Queer Chamber of Commerce made a tangible difference for entrepreneurs navigating a broader business landscape where 2SLGBTQI+ identities are not always visible.

One entrepreneur spoke to the value of developing referral partnerships, collaboration opportunities and greater visibility, but also to something harder to quantify: the relationships built with queer peers in the business sector and the deepened sense of community that came with them.

Even though the initial funding through the 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Program concluded in March 2026, the regional affiliates network and the local community ties built through the Ecosystem Fund will continue to sustain and enable queer entrepreneurial growth across Canada. ■



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FROM ANECDOTE TO EVIDENCE

The Research Network Reshaping Queer Entrepreneurship and Advocacy in Canada

By Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC)

Data matters. The right information puts the right arguments in the right hands and nowhere is that more true than in the ongoing effort to support and advocate for Canada's queer entrepreneurs. When research is rigorous, when evidence is accessible and when resources are consolidated in one place, advocates gain something powerful: the ability to make the case not just with conviction, but with proof.

The Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (REKH) is a national research network built to do exactly that. Its core purpose is to generate original data about the experiences of 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs across Canada while also bringing together best practices, practical tools and the kind of resources that can make a real difference for queer business owners navigating a landscape that has not always been designed with them in mind.

Critically, REKH is committed to making all of this publicly accessible online, ensuring that researchers, advocates, policymakers and entrepreneurs themselves can find what they need, understand the current state of queer entrepreneurship in Canada and use that understanding to push for meaningful change.

The Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub exists because of a concerted effort to secure dedicated federal investment in Canada's queer business community. The Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC) secured federal funding to establish the 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Program, which launched in 2023 with

Looking Ahead

Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC)

"With the amount of research that we have done with our partners across the country in the last two years, we're basically laying the groundwork for this body of research. It has been done by people who are in it and are living it. We brought people from academia, the broader community and other organizations and advocacy groups together to do this work. We really had that lens of people who are in it – living it – and the folks with the research and methodological experiences to understand it.

"We were able to have these folks come together, have these unique perspectives and create information and resources that we knew would go beyond being published in journals – that would actually be out there for people to use and to share."

— Dr. Glynnis Lieb, PhD, Principal Investigator at the Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub & Executive Director of Fyrefly Institute for Gender and Sexual Diversity

The Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub was made possible through the federal 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Program, a first-of-its-kind investment that ran from 2023 to 2026. Although initial funding through the program has concluded, the impact and momentum of the work it supported continues. The research and resources produced through REKH remain publicly available and they continue to serve as a foundation for effective policy development, funding decisions and ecosystem-building across the country.

The Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce is proud to recognize the Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub as a vital part of the queer entrepreneurship landscape in Canada. CQCC plays a vital role in the Canadian landscape of bridging business, community and research, and few initiatives reflect that mission as clearly as this one.

The Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub also stands as a meaningful example of what becomes possible when academia, community organizations and national institutions pursue a common goal. By gathering and sharing data, resources and best practices, it has helped shift the conversation around queer entrepreneurship in Canada from one driven by anecdote to one anchored in evidence. That shift matters, and the work of sustaining it is far from finished.

The Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub continues to do meaningful work with and for our communities. To learn more and to register for their upcoming conference in November 2026, visit rekh.ca.

commerce and non-profit organizations, have led the advocacy charge for queer entrepreneurs across the country. That work has consistently revealed the same underlying obstacle: a persistent shortage of reliable data and co-ordinated research that advocates can use to make their case to policymakers, funders and institutional stakeholders.

The statistics and data most commonly cited by advocates tell part of the story. The striking figures that Canada is home to more than 100,000 2SLGBTQI+-owned businesses, generating over $22 billion in economic activity and employing upwards of 435,000 Canadians, appear regularly in advocacy materials and public discourse. These numbers were generated in 2021 and like all research they reflect a moment in time.

For underrepresented and underfunded communities like that of queer entrepreneurship, commissioning ongoing research is not always possible. This is a structural reality shared across many equity-seeking groups, not a



Dr. Glynnis Lieb, PhD (left) and Sahana Parameswara, executive director, Gateway Association Alberta

$3 million earmarked specifically for the creation of a knowledge hub.

With that funding secured, a call for proposals was launched and, eventually, the Fyrefly Institute for Gender and Sexual Diversity, in partnership with the eHUB Entrepreneurship Centre at the University of Alberta, was selected as the institutional home of the Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub. That partnership brought together expertise in gender and sexual diversity research with hands-on entrepreneurship support, making the University of Alberta a natural and fitting foundation for a project of this scope and ambition.

THE MISSING LINK

The Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub addresses a critical gap in Canada's broader commitment to economic inclusion. For years, CQCC and its ecosystem partners, including regional chambers of

shortcoming of the advocates doing this work. New figures were expected by June 2026 and will offer a more current picture of queer entrepreneurship in Canada. In the meantime, the 2021 data remains a meaningful marker of the community's economic presence and its contribution to the broader Canadian economy.

This is not a peripheral issue. Access to current credible data is a prerequisite for the kind of systemic change that queer entrepreneurs need. Without it, the path to effective policy is longer and harder to defend. Funding allocations remain difficult to justify in the absence of evidence that speaks to present-day scale and impact. Opportunities to build meaningful connections between entrepreneurs, service providers and decision-makers go unrealized when no common authoritative picture of the ecosystem exists to anchor those conversations.

Advocates do have access to an important body of qualitative evidence. Case studies and personal stories circulate and serve a genuine purpose, putting a human face on the barriers queer entrepreneurs encounter and illustrating the broader value they create for the Canadian economy. That kind of storytelling is not incidental to advocacy; it is often what makes the stakes feel real to decision-makers who might otherwise engage with the issue at a distance.

However, personal narratives, by their nature, capture moments. They reflect individual experiences at particular points in time and while they resonate emotionally they cannot on their own speak to the scale, trajectory or structural conditions that shape queer entrepreneurship across the country. Comprehensive, regularly updated data transforms a collection of compelling stories into a coherent, defensible picture of the sector. It is the additional layer of evidence that allows advocates to move beyond saying that the challenges are real and instead showing the scale of the issue across the country.

REKH is designed to change that. By building and maintaining a living evidence base, it ensures that those making the case for queer entrepreneurship in Canada are equipped with what they actually need and that the people and organizations best positioned to act on that case have clear, current information to work from.

THE INSIGHTS TO DATE

The Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub received its first funding in May 2024. Since then, it has led a program of research and fieldwork to support the development of an accessible online platform, bringing together findings, tools and resources aimed at addressing the systemic barriers facing 2SLGBTQI+ business owners across Canada.



Paulete Poitras, a keynote speaker at the 2025 REKH conference

Among the outputs was a report exploring the concept of emancipatory entrepreneurship, described as an alternative perspective reframing how business creation is understood. Emancipatory entrepreneurship, as presented in this report, considers entrepreneurship as a tool for liberation rather than a pursuit of profit.

"This lens is particularly relevant for people from marginalized communities who have historically been excluded from mainstream institutions. They are more likely to experience discrimination and bias in traditional employment in the form of unequal hiring practices to outright harassment or termination. For them, entrepreneurship becomes more than a career choice; it offers a path to self-determination and economic independence."

— What is Emancipatory Entrepreneurship (REKH)

Using several key principles from the concept of emancipatory entrepreneurship, the REKH research team then travelled to regions across Canada, convening local networking events that brought together 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs and community organizations. The conversations and data gathered through those visits informed a series of individual regional reports, each mapping the local landscape for queer business owners, including the barriers they face and the opportunities available to them.

The fieldwork undertaken included:

- Yukon (December 2024)
- Winnipeg (February 2025)
- Vancouver (March 2025)
- Toronto (April 2025)
- Yellowknife, N.W.T. (June 2025)
- Saskatchewan (June 2025)
- Ottawa (July 2025)
- St. John's, N.L. (July 2025)
- Montreal (August 2025)



- Edmonton (April - September 2025)
- Calgary (September 2025)
- Moncton (December 2025)
- Halifax (July 2025)

REKH's fieldwork to date has uncovered findings that no national dataset could have anticipated and that speak directly to why place-sensitive research matters. In the Yukon, researchers found that "2SLGBTQ+ entrepreneurs and business owners must navigate the social dynamics of being visibly queer in small communities, where personal and professional spheres overlap significantly," with entrepreneurship frequently driven by survival rather than wealth creation.

In Winnipeg, the picture was one of structural fragmentation, where queer entrepreneurs face "a fragmented ecosystem, community segregation and the constant negotiation between visibility and safety." The work in Yellowknife pointed to a different but related tension: existing resources are often built on southern assumptions that do not travel well to northern contexts and local entrepreneurs are actively working to reshape them, captured plainly in the observation that "the challenge isn't access to resources, it's making them northern."

In Saskatchewan, the findings were among the most pointed with queer business visibility functioning as something closer to political expression in a climate where inclusion tends to operate as "cordial tolerance" rather than genuine acceptance, and where, as one finding noted, "being an openly queer entrepreneur can be both a business decision and a political act."

Taken together, these regional portraits do something aggregate data alone cannot: they reveal the texture of what queer entrepreneurship actually looks like across vastly different communities and they make the case for why the evidence base REKH is building must be both national in scope and deeply attentive to local context.

The research coming out of the Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub is doing something the sector has long needed. It is building awareness of the real barriers and opportunities facing queer entrepreneurs, strengthening co-ordination across a historically fragmented ecosystem and equipping advocates with the evidence required to have more substantive conversations with policymakers.

This body of work is not built on assumptions. It is grounded in data collected directly from the communities it aims to serve. That foundation is what makes the advocacy it will fuel credible, durable and harder to dismiss. ■



After the Dance Floor

The Business of Growing Old and Gay

By André Morriseau

My days of disco dancing and all-night fun have given way to aches, pains and Sunday Fundays that end before nightfall. I'd like to think I'm aging gracefully. Grace has very little to do with it. The real challenge is keeping the mind steady while navigating realities you never quite planned for.

Retirement, for me, feels less like a milestone and more like a question mark, especially as a single, aging gay man living in downtown Toronto. I am Village. I am People.

For over four decades, I've watched my world change. As a community, we buried friends during the AIDS crisis, many of them talented entrepreneurs and business leaders. My acting coach, Jim Scotland, comes to mind. He ran a stunt company here in Toronto and had a sharp entrepreneurial instinct. His humour and ingenuity sparked ideas that were always one step ahead of the moment.

Aging is no longer theoretical for my generation. It's logistical. It's climbing two long flights of stairs in my home each day and realizing my body is negotiating terms it never used to. It's also planning financially, structurally and personally for what comes next.

Nearly one in five Canadians is now over 65 and by 2030 that number is expected to approach one in four. Within that shift is a group rarely discussed in boardrooms: 2SLGBTQI+ seniors. Research consistently shows



Canadians and Refugees Building Bridges Together, August 2023

we are more likely to live alone and less likely to have children — two factors that directly impact housing, care and financial stability.

For the gay community, the story is layered. Some benefited from dual incomes and real estate gains. Others faced career disruption during the AIDS crisis, discrimination or long-term health challenges as HIV survivors. The myth of universal affluence hides a far more complex reality.

What is clear is this: the generation that built Toronto's modern queer economy is aging and the infrastructure to support it is thin.

From a business perspective, this is not a niche issue. It is a market reality. The "silver economy" already represents trillions in global activity. In Canada, seniors are a rapidly expanding share of spending across housing, health care, financial services and lifestyle sectors.

The Village tells its own story. Over 40 years, I've watched bars close and condos rise. The dance floors are smaller. The lineups are shorter. The energy has shifted. That evolution is not inherently negative, but culture does not sustain itself by accident. It requires intention, capital and leadership.

Aging will require the same.

For David Barnes, president, Barnes Management Group (BMG), understanding of this didn't come from theory; it came from experience.

Later in his career, he was introduced to Canada's private refugee sponsorship program through "Group of Five" where five ordinary citizens coming together change the



Left to right: Mian Samair, Scarborough Centre-Don Valley East MP Salma Zahid, David Barnes

trajectory of a human life. It is one of the most extraordinary uniquely Canadian models in the world.

What became clear very quickly was this: funding matters, but it is not the differentiator. Human connection is.

That realization became the foundation for Canadians and Refugees Building Bridges Together (CRBBT). It is not a charity — it is a movement grounded in a simple principle: belonging is built through relationships. They don't "support" newcomers — they walk alongside them, building a bridge from uncertainty to stability, from isolation to community.

In that process, something reciprocal happens. Lives don't just change, they intertwine. Communities become stronger, more resilient and more human.

This is the same principle reflected in David's Pathways to Caring Communities initiative. After 25 years in child welfare, he came to understand that complex challenges are not solved through hierarchy — they are solved through connection.

What models like private sponsorship demonstrate and what David's work reinforces is that community itself can function as infrastructure.

For business leaders, the implication is direct. This is not charity, it is design. It is what happens when empathy is operationalized and inclusion becomes a system, not a slogan. In an economy increasingly shaped by social impact, that thinking is not aspirational; it is competitive.

There is strength in aging into this understanding. We don't lose relevance, we refine it. The long game is not about stepping back, but about applying experience with precision and building systems that outlast us.

Some leaders embody this approach in other areas of public life as well. Lawyer and consultant Grant Wedge is one of them. Across Indigenous Affairs Ontario, the Ontario Public Service, and among the many political and Indigenous leaders he worked with, there is a shared sense of respect. His career was not simply long; it was consequential.

What distinguished Grant was not only his legal and policy expertise, but his ability to listen — genuinely and with intention. In spaces where history, lived experience and competing priorities converged, he never lost sight of the people behind the process. He understood that progress, particularly in the context of reconciliation, is not transactional; it is relational. Grant in his later years has transformed his career expertise into a consulting business that provides personal empowerment on his terms.

His work continues to shape trust in the community and that may be the most enduring form of business infrastructure any leader can leave behind.

And for those of us in our 60s and 70s, there is also a more personal imperative: to talk openly about what we need.

After 40 years downtown, I know this much: The Village was built by gay men and women who refused invisibility. We insisted on being seen in boardrooms, government, the arts and on the streets. It would be a bitter irony if aging pushed us back into the shadows.

The bottom line is simple. The business of dignity is not theoretical. It is arriving in real time. If we do not build the infrastructure to support our own generation, someone else will and they may not understand the lives we lived to get here.

Personally, this aging thing is an adventure. Growing older is an honour that can be defined by holding close our creativity, humour and getting on with the business of living.

The music may fade.

But the responsibility and the opportunity are just beginning. ■



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