BEYOND BARRIERS:

Understanding Queer and Trans Entrepreneurship in Edmonton

A REPORT FOR MEMBERS OF THE ALBERTA 2SLGBTQIA+ CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 • • • • Table of Contents

4 • • • • About this Report

5 • • • • PART ONE — The Primer: the foundations of the work

6 • • • • Welcome

7 • • • • The Challenge We're Exploring

8 • • • • Who is Part of This Work

10 • • • • Our Approach

13 • • • • The Current Landscape: Trends & Shaping Factors

15 • • • • What We're Hearing from Edmonton's Queer Entrepreneurs

18 • • • • Provocations and Reframes

24 • • • • What's Next: The Journey Mapping Workshops

25 • • • • PART TWO — What We Heard

26 • • • • What we heard across the room

29 • • • • What drives this community

30 • • • • How we framed the work

31 • • • • The eight loops of experience

33 • • • • Practices founders described that are working

33 • • • • Tensions the room stood inside

34 • • • • Deeper dives into selected experience loops

36 • • • • PART THREE — Implications for a Resource Guide

37 • • • • What founders carry

40 • • • • Where the ecosystem falls short

42 • • • • What founders are building anyway

43 • • • • PART FOUR — Overarching Observations

44 • • • • Three patterns point toward a different model of entrepreneurship

45 • • • • Where this goes next

46 • • • • PART FIVE — Stakeholder Feedback

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report tells the story of the Beyond Barriers project across three phases, in one place for members of the Alberta 2SLGBTQIA+ Chamber of Commerce.

Part One is the primer that grounds the work: why the project exists, who is part of it, what the research shows, and a framework for the queer entrepreneurship journey — the same grounding every workshop participant received. Part Two is what queer and trans entrepreneurs told us at the May 25, 2026 journey mapping workshop. Part Three sets out twelve implications for the Chamber's digital resource guide. Part Four steps back and offers observations that only become visible when the whole arc of the work is held together.

A note on confidentiality: the workshop's norm was that what is said may travel, but names will not. Throughout this report, contributions are paraphrased, identifying details are generalized, and no participant is named or attributable.

PART 1:
THE PRIMER: FOUNDATIONS OF THE WORK

Why this project exists, what the research shows, and the journey framework the work is built on.

The first phase of Beyond Barriers laid the groundwork for everything that follows: the case for the project, the partners behind it, the research landscape, and a framework for the queer entrepreneurship journey.



WELCOME

This primer is an introduction.

The Beyond Barriers project is exploring the entrepreneurial experiences of Queer and trans people in Edmonton — the barriers they face, the strategies they use to navigate them, and what a more inclusive business environment might look like. This document offers a window into that work: why it matters, how it's being done, and what we're beginning to learn.

It isn't meant to be a comprehensive research report. Think of it as a shared foundation — a way of bringing readers into the conversation with enough context to understand the challenge, enough evidence to appreciate its stakes, and enough openness to stay curious about what comes next.

You'll find here: the gap this project is responding to; the partners and community members making it possible; a snapshot of what existing research tells us about Queer and trans entrepreneurship; and early themes emerging from listening sessions with Edmonton entrepreneurs who were generous enough to share their stories.

This work is grounded in the belief that Queer and trans voices belong at the centre of conversations about their own economic lives — not as an afterthought, but as the starting point.

THE CHALLENGE WE'RE EXPLORING

Queer and trans people are entrepreneurs at higher rates — often not by choice, but by necessity. Exclusion from traditional workplaces, discrimination in hiring, and the psychological weight of navigating environments that weren't built with them in mind have pushed many members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community toward building something of their own. Entrepreneurship, in this sense, is often less about opportunity and more about survival — and sometimes, about creating the kind of affirming, community-rooted spaces that didn't otherwise exist.

And yet, the path to building and sustaining a business is rarely straightforward for Queer and trans entrepreneurs. Research is beginning to document the barriers they face — difficulty accessing funding, exclusion
from mainstream business networks, challenges finding safe and affirming spaces to operate — but that evidence base remains thin, and almost none of it speaks to Edmonton specifically.

This project aims to shift that.

Beyond Barriers is asking a deceptively simple question:

What is it actually like to be a Queer or trans entrepreneur in Edmonton?

From the earliest spark of an idea through to the ongoing work of keeping a business alive, where do people encounter walls — and how do they find ways through or around them?

This project is also rooted in something beyond documenting barriers. Queerness is an experience of generativity. The same exclusionary practices that push Queer and trans entrepreneurs out of 'conventional' paths have also cultivated a reimagining - building structures, relationships, and ways of working that didn't exist before. The barrier and deprivation frame is not the whole story. This project is equally interested in the creativity, resilience, and radical reimagining that Queer and trans entrepreneurs bring to business and community.

We are engaging a diverse range of entrepreneurs across different kinds of ventures: makers and market vendors, online sellers, creatives, retail and hospitality owners, and tech founders. And because the 2SLGBTQIA+ community is not a monolith, we are paying particular attention to the ways that race, Indigeneity, disability, newcomer status, and other dimensions of identity shape these experiences in distinct and intersecting ways.

The goal isn't just to document the problem. It's to generate the kind of grounded, Edmonton-specific knowledge that can actually move things — informing better policies, more responsive services, and a business ecosystem that works for everyone.

WHO IS PART OF THIS WORK

This project is a collaboration — between organizations, researchers, and most importantly, the Queer and trans entrepreneurs whose lived experiences are at the heart of everything we're learning.

Alberta 2SLGBTQIA+ Chamber of Commerce

Project Lead

The Alberta 2SLGBTQIA+ Chamber of Commerce is the province's only chamber of commerce dedicated to gender- and sexually-diverse communities. Their mandate is to foster a strong, inclusive Alberta economy by connecting, educating, and supporting Queer and trans entrepreneurs and professionals. The Chamber leads this project and brings deep roots in Edmonton's Queer business community — roots that have made it possible to reach the entrepreneurs whose stories inform this work.

Action Lab

Process and Design

Action Lab is a social innovation consultancy and social enterprise of Skills Society, with recognized expertise in service design, participatory research, and community-led problem solving. Action Lab is leading the design and facilitation of the listening sessions and journey mapping workshops at the heart of this project, and is supporting the development of the practical tools and resource guides that will come out of it. Their space on 124th Street in Edmonton is home to many of the in-person sessions.

Dr. Leanne Hedberg

Research Partner

At the time of engagement, Dr. Leanne Hedberg held the Canada Research Chair in Inclusive Entrepreneurship and was a lead researcher on the national Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub — a $3.2 million research initiative exploring the systemic constraints facing 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs across Canada. Her national findings are informing and enriching what we're learning locally, helping us situate Edmonton's story within a broader picture.

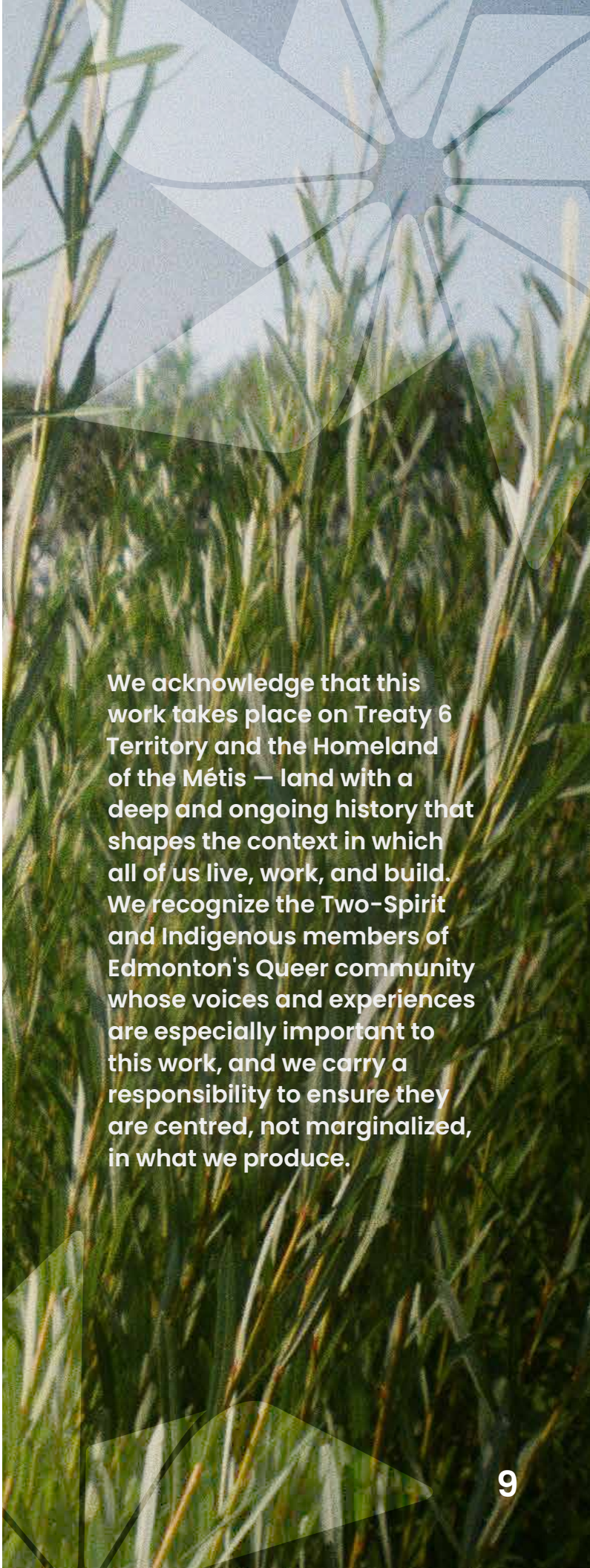
The City of Edmonton and Edmonton Community Foundation

Funders

This project is made possible through the generous support of the City of Edmonton (specifically the 2SLGBTQIA+ Beyond Belonging Grant Program) and the Edmonton Community Foundation. Their investment in this work reflects a shared commitment to building a more inclusive and equitable Edmonton.

The Entrepreneurs

None of this work would be possible without the Queer and trans entrepreneurs who have given their time, their trust, and their stories to this project. Sharing lived experience – especially experience that includes discrimination, exclusion, and hardship – is an act of generosity. We don't take it lightly, and we are committed to ensuring that what we learn from these conversations leads to real and meaningful change.



We acknowledge that this work takes place on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis — land with a deep and ongoing history that shapes the context in which all of us live, work, and build. We recognize the Two-Spirit and Indigenous members of Edmonton's Queer community whose voices and experiences are especially important to this work, and we carry a responsibility to ensure they are centred, not marginalized, in what we produce.

OUR APPROACH

We believe research and design should be done with community — not extracted from it. That principle shapes everything about how this project is designed.

Listening First

The foundation of this work is conversation. We began by conducting in-depth listening sessions with Queer and trans entrepreneurs in Edmonton — open, one-on-one conversations designed to create enough space for people to share not just facts about their businesses, but the texture of their experiences. What has been hard. What has helped. What they wish existed. These conversations are the richest source of insight we have, and they inform everything that follows.

Journey Mapping

Building on what we hear in the listening sessions, we are using a method called journey mapping to make sense of the entrepreneurial experience as a whole — exploring cycles of experience, from the spark of possibly becoming a business owner through to growing and succession, and everything in between. Engaging in reflections on these cycles of experience will help illuminate where Queer and trans entrepreneurs encounter barriers, gaps, or moments of unexpected support. Journey mapping is a participatory method, meaning it happens with community members rather than being done to them. Workshop participants are the experts in the room.

Triangulating What We Learn

No single source of insight tells the whole story. Throughout this project we are drawing on three streams of knowledge and bringing them into conversation with each other: what entrepreneurs share from their own lived experience; what existing research and literature tells us about 2SLGBTQIA+ entrepreneurship more broadly; and what emerges from the collective sense-making that happens in workshops. The richest insights tend to live at the intersection of all three.

Values That Guide Us

A few commitments run through everything we do in this project. We approach all engagement in a trauma-informed way, recognizing that many of the experiences we're asking people to reflect on are difficult ones. We centre intersectionality — understanding that being Queer or trans is one dimension of identity among many, and that race, Indigeneity, disability, newcomer status, and other factors shape people's experiences in distinct ways that we must actively listen for. And we are committed to making sure this work produces something useful — not just a document that sits on a shelf, but tools and recommendations that the community can actually use.

Thinking in Horizons

It helps to have a shared way of thinking about the scope of change this project is working toward. We're using a framework called Three Horizons[1] to do that.

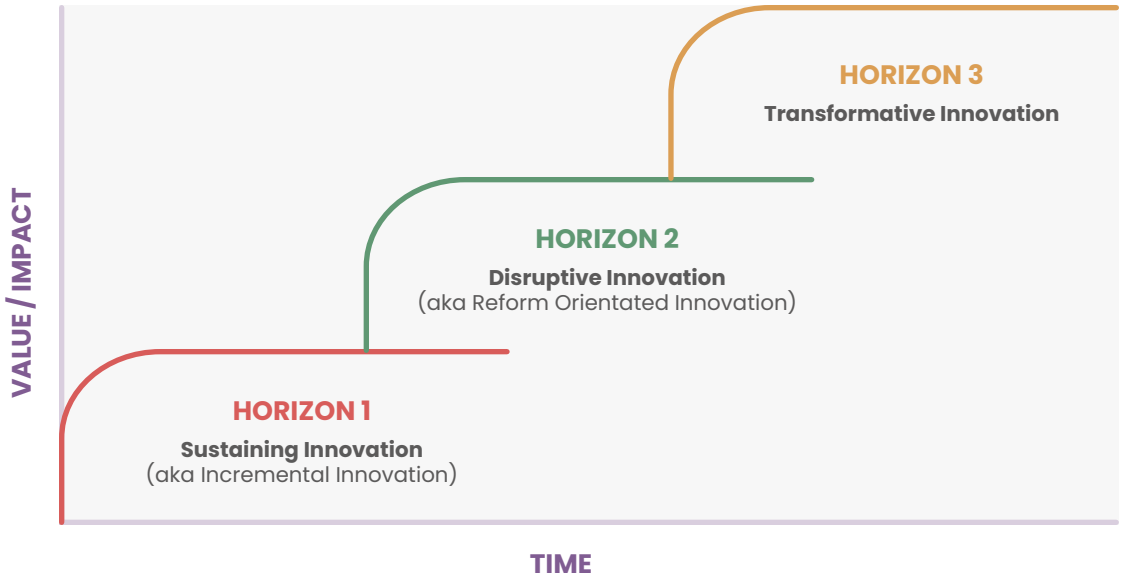
Horizon 1 (Same Game, Same Rules) is the present landscape — the existing systems, structures, and practices that shape the experience of Queer and trans entrepreneurs right now. This includes the barriers built into how funding is accessed, how business spaces are rented, how networks are formed, and how institutions operate. Horizon 1 isn't all bad — there are things working well that deserve to be understood and strengthened — but it's also where much of the exclusion and harm currently lives.

Horizon 2 (Same Game, Different Rules) is where innovation is already beginning to happen — the emerging practices, experiments, and community-led responses that are starting to shift things. Affirming market spaces, peer mentorship networks, inclusive procurement practices, and community-based approaches to financing are all examples of Horizon 2 thinking already taking shape in Edmonton and beyond.

Horizon 3 (Different Game, Different Rules) is the longer-horizon vision — a future where the business ecosystem is genuinely designed for Queer and trans people to thrive, where identity is no longer a barrier to economic participation, and where the innovations of today have become the new normal.

This project is primarily focused on Horizons 1 and 2 — understanding the present reality deeply, and identifying the emerging practices and changes that show the most promise. But we think it's important to keep Horizon 3 in view. The journey mapping workshops are partly about practical problem solving, and partly about giving people permission to imagine something bigger.

[1] Three Horizons Framework *(McKinsey & Company, 2009), adapted by Mark Cabaj, Here to There Consulting Inc.*



	HORIZON 1	HORIZON 2	HORIZON 3
	Sustaining Innovation	**Disruptive Innovation**	**Transformative Innovation**
Short-hand	*Same Game, Same Rules*	*Same Game, Different Rules*	*Different Game, Different Rules*
Long Version	Innovative actions that can be implemented with minor tweaks to existing polices and systems.	Innovative actions that require substantive changes to existing systems and policies in order to make a deeper and more lasting change.	Actions that are based on radically new ideas, values, and beliefs that require radical changes in polices and systems.
Results / Effectiveness	Predictable, quicker, modest.	Less predictable, slower, more substantive.	Unpredictable, possibly long term, transformative.
Feasibility	Easier - and less resistance - to implement. Changes in capabilities not required.	More difficult - some resistance - to implement. Possibly new capabilities required.	Possibly very difficult to implement. Many capabilties unknown; need to be developed over time.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE: TRENDS & SHAPING FACTORS

What follows is not a comprehensive literature review. It is a snapshot, a selection of findings from recent Canadian research that helps paint a picture of the broader context in which Edmonton's Queer and trans entrepreneurs are building their businesses.

When Workplaces Aren't Safe, People Build their Own

Emerging research shows that for many Queer and trans people in Canada, entrepreneurship is less a choice than a response — a way of constructing economic security when conventional employment has proven unsafe, unwelcoming, or simply closed off. Research consistently documents that 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and trans and gender non-conforming people in particular, face persistent barriers to employment and advancement in traditional workplaces.[2] For example, a 2016 survey found that 45% of respondents believed their workplace was not inclusive of trans employees.[3] These are not marginal experiences — they are systemic patterns that push people out of conventional work and toward building something of their own.

An Uneven Starting Place

Current data shows that many Queer and trans entrepreneurs are starting their businesses not from a position of financial security but from one of economic precarity. Statistics Canada's analysis of 2021 Census data found that transgender women earned 20.3% less than cisgender men, transgender men earned 10.1% less, and non-binary people earned 5.9% less, even after controlling for age and employment characteristics.[4] Older data from the Trans Pulse Project found that despite 71% of trans people having at least some post-secondary education, approximately half earned $15,000 or less annually.[4] This is the financial ground many Queer and trans entrepreneurs are standing on when they decide to start something — without inherited wealth, without family capital, and often without access to the financial literacy and networks that others take for granted.

Barriers in the Business Ecosystem

Moving into entrepreneurship does not mean leaving discrimination behind. The Diversity Institute's 2022 Canadian report found that approximately 37% of 2SLGBTQ+ entrepreneurs choose not to be public about their identity when accessing funding or services, specifically to avoid discrimination.[5] In the Trans Pulse Project report from 2015, approximately 28% of 2SLGBTQ+-owned businesses reported experiencing discrimination directly because of the owner's identity.[6] A 2024 report from Startup Canada and the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce found that 75% of Queer founders reported actively concealing their identity and ownership status.[7] The funding landscape compounds these challenges: as the Diversity Institute report notes, most funders tend to be white, heterosexual, and cisgender, creating structural, not merely

attitudinal, barriers to capital access for Queer and trans entrepreneurs.[5]

The Social and Political Climate

The broader social and political climate shapes experiences, opportunities, and realities for Queer and trans entrepreneurs. Statistics Canada reported that between 2020 and 2023, hate crimes targeting sexual orientation more than tripled, and hate crimes targeting gender identity or expression have more than doubled over the same period.[8] Alberta has not been exempt from this trend – according to reporting by Global News, Alberta RCMP noted a significant spike in hate-related incidents in 2023.[9] These are not abstract trends. They shape real decisions Queer and trans entrepreneurs make, including things like: where to locate a business, how to market to Queer communities, whether to be out as a Queer-owned enterprise, and what safety measures need to be built into everyday operations.

This context is part of what makes Edmonton-specific research not just useful but necessary. Understanding how Queer and trans entrepreneurs are navigating this climate – and what would make it easier to do so – is one of the things this project is trying to learn.

The Edmonton Gap

Despite this growing national evidence base, no co-design research, that we are aware of, has mapped the entrepreneurial experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ people in Edmonton specifically. This means we are limited in understanding what barriers are most acute in this particular context, or what local resources and networks are making a difference. That absence is not neutral – it means that policymakers, funders, and support organizations have been making decisions without the evidence they need to make them well.

This project is seeking to shift this.

---

[2] Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH). (2022, updated 2024). *Supports for 2SLGBTQ+ entrepreneurs across Canada.* https://wekh.ca/supports-for-2slgbtq-entrepreneurs/

[3] Ibid. Citing a 2016 survey of over 800 Canadians examining lesbian and gay experiences in the workplace.

[4] Statistics Canada. *(2025). Socioeconomic outcomes of transgender and non-binary people in Canada (Catalogue No. 91F0015M).* https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91f0015m/91f0015m2025001-eng.htm

[5] Diversity Institute (Toronto Metropolitan University). (2022). *Access and equity for 2SLGBTQ+ businesses in Canada.* https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/diversity/reports/Access-and-Equity-for-2SLGBTQ-Businesses-in-Canada.pdf

[6] Trans Pulse Project. (2015). *Statistics relevant for human rights policy.* https://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Trans-PULSE-Statistics-Relevant-for-Human-Rights-Policy-June-2015.pdf

[7] Startup Canada & Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC). (2024). *Queer entrepreneurs outperform, yet equitable support still sorely lacking in Canada.* https://www.startupcan.ca/queer-entrepreneurs-outperform-yet-equitable-support-still-sorely-lacking-in-canada/

[8] Statistics Canada. (2025, March 25). *Police-reported hate crime in Canada, 2023.* The Daily. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250325/dq250325a-eng.htm

[9] Briere, T. (2023, June 22). LGBTQ2 hate incidents spike across Alberta; RCMP encourage reporting. Global News. https://globalnews.ca/tag/alberta-hate-crime/

WHAT WE'RE HEARING FROM EDMONTON'S QUEER ENTREPRENEURS

Here we share some high level insights and preliminary themes from eight, 60 minute conversations we had with Queer Entrepreneurs. This is not meant to be a robust synthesis of themes, but instead provides an overview of some interesting and relevant insights given the scope of this particular project.

This small snapshot of experiences, helped inform the development of the workshops, providing early signals as to where we should focus energy and create space for additional sharing. The workshops will act as additional data collection opportunities to further understand the experiences of Queer Entrepreneurs.

Theme 1: Being out isn't one decision. It's many.

For many of the founders we talked to, choosing how visible to be isn't a one-time call. It comes up again in every email signature. Every social post. Every networking room. Every vendor call.

What changes the answer? Who's in the room. The venue. The news cycle. Whether the bar across town just got a brick through its window. This work doesn't show up on paper anywhere. But it's real, and it adds up over years.

There's a tension that comes with it. Visibility can be how people find you. It can also be how people target you. Some founders stay low-key on purpose. Referral only. Hard to find for the wrong people. Others are fully out and accept the cost. Most are somewhere in between, and the answer shifts day to day.

Theme 2: Often, the founder is the first customer.

Several founders we talked to didn't start their business by finding a gap in the market and filling it. They started because the thing they needed didn't exist, and someone had to make it. That someone was them. The founder is the first customer. Sometimes the first person who really needed it. Often the first proof it could work.

This is a different kind of business than a typical small business. It's closer to community infrastructure. The economics work differently. The growth logic works differently. The reasons to keep going work differently. Some of these founders have built their values directly into the legal structure of the business from day one. Capping the size of the team. Setting limits on growth. Choosing a legal form that fits the mission, not the market. These aren't values on a wall. They're commitments built into the bones of the business.

Theme 3: Care isn't a cost. It is the product.

Business advice often treats emotional and relational work as inefficiency. Something to systematize away. For many of the founders we talked to, that work is what's actually being purchased. The care, the handling, the embodied experience of the person doing it. Not a side benefit. The point.

This matters especially for clients who've been mishandled elsewhere. The thoughtfulness and dignity isn't a byproduct. It's the value. Some founders refuse to take on work outside their lived experience, unless someone on the project has that experience. They put the values into the project itself, not into a statement on a website.

Theme 4: The double weight of being held to a higher standard from both directions.

A pattern came up across multiple conversations. Queer-coded businesses get less room to make mistakes than their non-queer counterparts.

From outside, behaviors that pass without comment at a non-queer business get amplified criticism at a queer-coded one. One founder described this as ultimately unsustainable for the long-term survival of queer spaces.

From inside, queer-marketed spaces are held as moral examples by their own communities. When they fall short, the disappointment is sharper. The community has fewer safe places to bring grievances, which then surface publicly. The pressure adds up from both sides at once.

There's a tension here that no founder in the sample had resolved cleanly. Public solidarity protects the sector from outside criticism. It can also let harm continue inside. Internal accountability addresses harm directly. Doing it publicly can be used against the whole community. Both options have real costs. Without a neutral place to bring problems, founders are often stuck choosing between staying silent and going public.

Theme 5: Thin margins meet care-driven pricing.

Many of the founders we talked to are running on thinner margins than their non-queer counterparts. Contributing factors may include less family wealth to draw from at the start, a customer base that often can't pay market rates, pricing that lowers fees for the community, or taking on work that by the hour doesn't make sense.

None of the founders we interviewed had accessed a regular small-business loan. Several had been operating for over a decade before getting their first grant.

Three different ways of making this work showed up across the conversations. Some founders charge premium clients more so community clients can be charged less, inside the same business. Some run a separate profitable business that funds the one they actually care about. Some take on a smaller number of well-paying long-term clients to make space for a larger volume of lower-rate community work. None of these founders called their workaround "strategy" at the time. Each described it as survival.

Theme 6: How founders find mentorship, connection, and each other.

The most useful peer support, those we interviewed identified, wasn't happening through formal mentorship programs. Several founders described feeling

intimidated by application-heavy, matched-pair structures. Others said they couldn't find their person through these traditional pathways.

What's working instead is informal. Small founder check-in groups of two or three people. Hundreds of "exploration calls" before launching. Loose relational pairings outside any formal program. Joint memberships across multiple groups that signal multiple commitments at once. The form is informal, relational, and self-organized. It works better than any structured mentorship.

Some founders have also explicitly built their offering across multiple communities at once. Queer and disability and racialized and neurodivergent communities, served as one offering rather than as separate single-identity brands.

PROVOCATIONS AND REFRAMES

The work of this project isn't just about documenting problems, it's about seeing them differently. The following provocations are offered not as conclusions but as invitations: ways of thinking about Queer and trans entrepreneurship that might challenge assumptions, open up new questions, and help us collectively imagine something better than what currently exists.

A Queer Entrepreneurship Journey

What does the arc of building a business actually look and feel like when you're Queer or trans? Not the sanitized version — the pitch deck, the growth chart, the exit strategy — but the real one, with all its emotional texture, structural friction, and hard-won meaning.

The framework below traces that journey from its earliest spark through to questions of legacy and letting go. It was developed through a combination of informal conversations with queer and trans entrepreneurs in Edmonton, a review of emerging literature on queer and feminist approaches to entrepreneurship,[10, 11] and an iterative process of synthesis with an AI language model. It is not a definitive or exhaustive account but rather, offered as a reflective tool. Participants are invited to see themselves in it, push back against it, and reshape it with their own experience.

We offer it not as a universal map, but as a starting place for deepening our

- Spark & Becoming
- Legitimacy & Belonging
- Starting Out (or Starting Sideways)
- Body, Energy & Space
- Sustaining (and Surviving)
- Money, Worth & Pricing
- Growing (On Your Own Terms)
- Navigating Power
- Inflection & Transformation
- Later, Legacy & Letting Go
- Joy, Pleasure & Meaning

understanding of the Queer entrepreneurship journey. These stages are best understood as cycles of experience rather than a linear path from point A to point B - recognizing that people may be moving through several cycles simultaneously, and that any cycle may be revisited or reshaped by lived experience.

Spark & Becoming

- The first flicker, a felt sense that something is possible before you have words for it
- Saying "I could do this" out loud for the first time, and what that feels like
- Desire as data, trusting an internal pull before you have external validation
- The tension between building something new and replicating the structures you're trying to escape
- "Coming out" as a business owner, especially when it disrupts expectations around stability or sellout-hood

What gave you permission to want this? Was there a moment, a person, or did it just insist on itself?

Legitimacy & Belonging

- Finding (or not finding) mentors or models who look like you and have built the kind of thing you want to build
- The first time someone questions your credibility in a way that feels identity-coded
- The imposter experience not just personally but structurally, being made to feel like you don't belong in rooms you've earned
- Deciding how visible your identity is in your work, and for whose comfort

Where did you find permission to take up space? And where are you still negotiating it?

Starting Out (or Starting Sideways)

- First exchange of value, which may not look like a traditional transaction
- Choosing a legal and financial structure without inherited templates or family capital
- Inheriting (or not inheriting) financial literacy, and the shame that can surround that gap
- Building early credibility without traditional networks or gatekeepers

What did you have to figure out on your own that others seemed to just know? Who or what filled that gap?

Body, Energy & Space

- Physical safety in workspaces, at markets, events, or client meetings
- The energy cost of code-switching or masking, and what it takes from the work
- Building or choosing spaces where you and your clients can actually exhale

- Rest as resistance, and the ongoing negotiation with hustle culture

What does it cost you to show up in certain spaces? And where do you get to just be?

Sustaining (and Surviving)

- The feast/famine cycle as a structural problem, not a personal failure
- Financial precarity as a political condition, not just a business stage
- Finding reciprocal community, not just networking but actual mutual support
- The loneliness of solopreneurship, especially when your work is community-facing but the building of it is done alone
- The role of chosen family or community in making the work possible, and the strain it can put on those relationships

What's actually holding this up? And what's the cost of that to the people holding it with you?

Money, Worth & Pricing

- The first time you raise your prices, and everything that surfaces emotionally
- Overcoming chronic undercharging shaped by internalized marginalization
- The tension between financial sustainability and the ethics of accumulation
- Accessing capital while navigating a funding landscape that wasn't designed for you

What's the story you carry about what your work is worth? Where did it come from?

Growing (On Your Own Terms)

- Questioning whether growth is even the goal, and what it's for
- First collaborator or hire, and the weight of being responsible for someone else's livelihood
- Building culture intentionally when the dominant models weren't built for bodies like yours
- Navigating collaborations that start as friendships, and what happens when they end
- Expanding beyond the community that supported you first, and what that costs

What does growth mean to you, and what are you not willing to sacrifice for it?

Navigating Power

- Moments of visibility and what they cost (press, platforms, being "the diverse voice")
- Being tokenized, co-opted, or flattened by mainstream interest
- Holding boundaries with clients, collaborators, or audiences who want your labor but not your politics
- Gatekeepers, and the choice to go around them, dismantle them, or ignore them entirely

- Shifting political conditions as real business variables, not just background noise

When has your visibility been used against you, or used by someone else? How did you respond?

Inflection & Transformation

- Burnout not as failure but as information
- Pivoting in response to personal shifts (health, relationship, identity evolution) not just market ones
- The moment you realize the business has outgrown its original container
- Grief for the version of the work or yourself you're leaving behind
- Recommitment, the conscious choice to keep going after a hard season, which is its own kind of founding moment

What has the business asked you to let go of? What have you refused to?

Later, Legacy & Letting Go

- Questioning the exit narrative, who benefits from acquisition or scale, and at what cost
- Succession without assuming there's an heir or a buyer
- Winding down with care, especially when the business holds community relationships and trust
- Legacy as ongoing relation, not monument

What do you want to leave behind, and for whom? What would it mean to let this go well?

- Celebration and the queer tradition of making joy under pressure
- The pleasure of building something that didn't exist before, on terms you chose
- Moments when the work, the identity, and the impact feel like one thing
- Collective joy as a generative force, not just a reward at the end of the hard part

When does this feel like yours? What does it feel like when it does?

Entrepreneurship as Emancipation

Most mainstream narratives about entrepreneurship are built around opportunity – the gap in the market, the bold idea, the calculated risk taken from a position of relative security. For many Queer and trans people, that story doesn't fit.

Research consistently documents that 2SLGBTQIA+ people face significant discrimination in traditional employment – in hiring, in workplace culture, and in advancement. The Diversity Institute's 2022 report[12] on access and equity for 2SLGBTQ+ businesses in Canada found that experiences of workplace discrimination are a meaningful driver of entrepreneurship within the community, as is the desire to build working environments that are affirming rather than



merely tolerable. The StartOut 2023 State of LGBTQ+ Entrepreneurship Report[13] similarly found that many LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs cited exclusion from conventional workplaces as a factor in their decision to start a business.

In this light, entrepreneurship looks less like an opportunity seized and more like a freedom built — sometimes deliberately, sometimes out of necessity, often both at once. It is a way of refusing the terms on offer and constructing something new. The businesses Queer and trans entrepreneurs build often carry that origin in their DNA: they tend to be community-rooted, values-driven, and oriented toward creating the kind of affirming spaces their founders couldn't find elsewhere.

A note on sourcing: the framing of entrepreneurship as emancipation draws on the sources cited as well as the broader literature on necessity entrepreneurship among marginalized groups. It also reflects themes emerging from our own listening sessions. It is offered here as a generative lens, not a settled research finding — and we expect the journey mapping workshops to deepen and complicate it.

Redefining What Success Means

The dominant language of business success — growth, scale, profit, exit — was not designed with Queer and trans entrepreneurs in mind. It reflects a set of assumptions about what businesses are for, what

constitutes winning, and whose values get built into the infrastructure of commerce.

Many of the entrepreneurs we've been listening to are quietly — and sometimes not so quietly — refusing those terms. They are asking different questions: not just how do I grow but what is growth actually for. Not just what is my business worth but worth to whom, and by what measure. Not just what's my exit strategy but what does it mean to let something go in a way that honours the community it served?

These aren't just philosophical questions. They have practical implications for how businesses are structured, how success is measured, and what kinds of support and resources are actually useful to Queer and trans entrepreneurs. A funding landscape built around rapid growth and investor returns may be actively misaligned with the kinds of businesses many Queer and trans entrepreneurs want to build — businesses that prioritize sustainability, community benefit, and the wellbeing of the people doing the work.

Dr. Leanne Hedberg's research with the national Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub[14] is beginning to surface these tensions explicitly — interrogating the assumptions baked into mainstream entrepreneurship discourse and asking what a more expansive, community-centered definition of business success might look like. We think that's exactly the right question, and we're carrying it into the workshops.

[10] Friedrich, J., & Steyaert, C. (2025). Emancipatory entrepreneuring as disidentification: A queer-feminist view of becoming a democratic cooperative. *Human Relations, 78*(6). https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267241302783

[11] Kidney, E., Marlow, S., & Cooney, T. M. (n.d.). *Everyday prejudices: An intersectional exploration of the experiences of lesbian and gay entrepreneurs.* Dublin City University. https://doras.dcu.ie/29507/3/Kidney%20et%20al..pdf

[12] Diversity Institute (Toronto Metropolitan University). (2022). Access and equity for 2SLGBTQ+ businesses in Canada. https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/diversity/reports/Access-and-Equity-for-2SLGBTQ-Businesses-in-Canada.pdf

[13] StartOut. (2023). *State of LGBTQ+ entrepreneurship report.* https://startout.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2023-State-of-LGBTQ-Entrepreneurship-Report.pdf

[14] More on the Rainbow Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub here: https://www.rekh.ca/rekhproject-team

WHAT'S NEXT: THE JOURNEY MAPPING WORKSHOPS

The listening sessions that informed this primer were just the beginning. What came next was where the work became collective.

The Workshops

We brought together Queer and trans entrepreneurs from across Edmonton for a series of journey mapping workshops – participatory sessions designed to go deeper into the experiences, barriers, and possibilities that the listening sessions had begun to surface. Rather than presenting findings to participants, these workshops invited participants to be co-investigators – to test, challenge, and build on what we were learning together.

A separate session brought together businesses, service providers, and other stakeholders – sharing what we had heard from Queer and trans entrepreneurs and inviting the people and organizations who shaped the business environment to engage with that knowledge directly.

What We Hoped to Learn

The workshops were designed to help us map the entrepreneurial journey in greater detail – identifying not just where barriers existed, but where along the journey they hit hardest, what forms they took, and what conditions made them easier or harder to navigate. We were equally interested in moments of resilience, resourcefulness, and community support – the strategies and networks that helped people keep going.

Where This Leads

What we learned in the workshops fed directly into:

1. **Resources and supports for Queer and trans entrepreneurs in Edmonton** – though the exact form these took was guided by what we heard. We held a few possibilities:
    - A practical resource guide that connected Queer and trans entrepreneurs to verified, relevant resources
    - A navigation support function that helped people find their way through funding, legal, and other systems that weren't always designed with them in mind
    - Queer-specific programming that filled gaps where existing resources fell short or didn't speak to their lived experience
2. **A set of policy and practice recommendations** for the organizations, institutions, and systems that shaped that landscape

The goal was for both of these tools to be genuinely useful – grounded in real experience, responsive to the full diversity of the community, and built with Horizon 3 in view.

PART 2:
WHAT WE HEARD

What queer and trans entrepreneurs told us at the journey mapping workshop.

On May 25, 2026, queer and trans entrepreneurs from across Edmonton spent three hours working through eight loops of experience drawn from the project's listening sessions. They tested what had been heard, added what was missing, and named what the frames had not captured. What follows is what the room said, reported without attribution.



WHAT WE HEARD ACROSS THE ROOM

Six patterns held across every round, station, and group — the shortest answer to what queer and trans entrepreneurship in Edmonton asks of the people doing it.

Identity work never stops.

Coming out, calibrating visibility, and managing disclosure are ongoing, repeated labour.

Time and energy are inventory.

Two groups independently reached the same language: both are finite business assets to be budgeted, not free inputs.

Care is the product — priced thin.

Relational labour is what clients pay for, yet care-driven pricing meets thin margins. Cross-subsidy is how founders survive it.

Community over competition.

Scarcity thinking was named as a system, not a truth. Identity-centred businesses can serve their communities legitimately.

Boundaries make it sustainable.

Every group landed on limits: you cannot satisfy everyone, and safety comes first.

Joy is a reason, not a bonus.

Joy surfaced across every conversation as what makes the loops worth being inside — and as something worth protecting, even from growth.









Photos from the workshops





Photos from the workshops

WHAT DRIVES THIS COMMUNITY

Asked what inspires them as entrepreneurs, participants gave answers grouping into four motivations.

- **Building what didn't exist.** A puzzle piece missing from the picture; the support our children need that never existed before.
- **Working outside the set path.** Rock climbing with no fixed route; moving between the small boat and the big one, and what authenticity costs at scale.
- **Culture and identity as method.** Traditional Indigenous values and Southeast Asian understandings of mutual reliance — identity shaping the work, not sitting beside it.
- **Interdependence.** Connected gears, where moving one shifts the others; a penguin colony drawing on gifts the community already holds.

Beneath all four the room named a shared thread that frames everything else in this report: this work is bigger than any one business. Working together is simultaneously a value and a condition of survival — so any resource or policy treating these founders as individual economic units works against the grain.

"It's not just your journey but everyone's journey."

HOW WE FRAMED THE WORK

The project draws on three sources at once: published research, listening sessions with Edmonton founders, and workshops that test those findings locally. It also uses a simple way of talking about change over time, called Three Horizons:

- **Horizon 1** — the way things work now, including the barriers built into funding, leasing, and how networks form.
- **Horizon 2** — the innovations already emerging: affirming market spaces, peer networks, community-based financing.
- **Horizon 3** — the future we actually want, where identity is no longer a barrier to economic participation.

The workshop worked mainly in Horizons 1 and 2, naming both at once: the real barriers, and the creativity and gifts that come with queer identity.

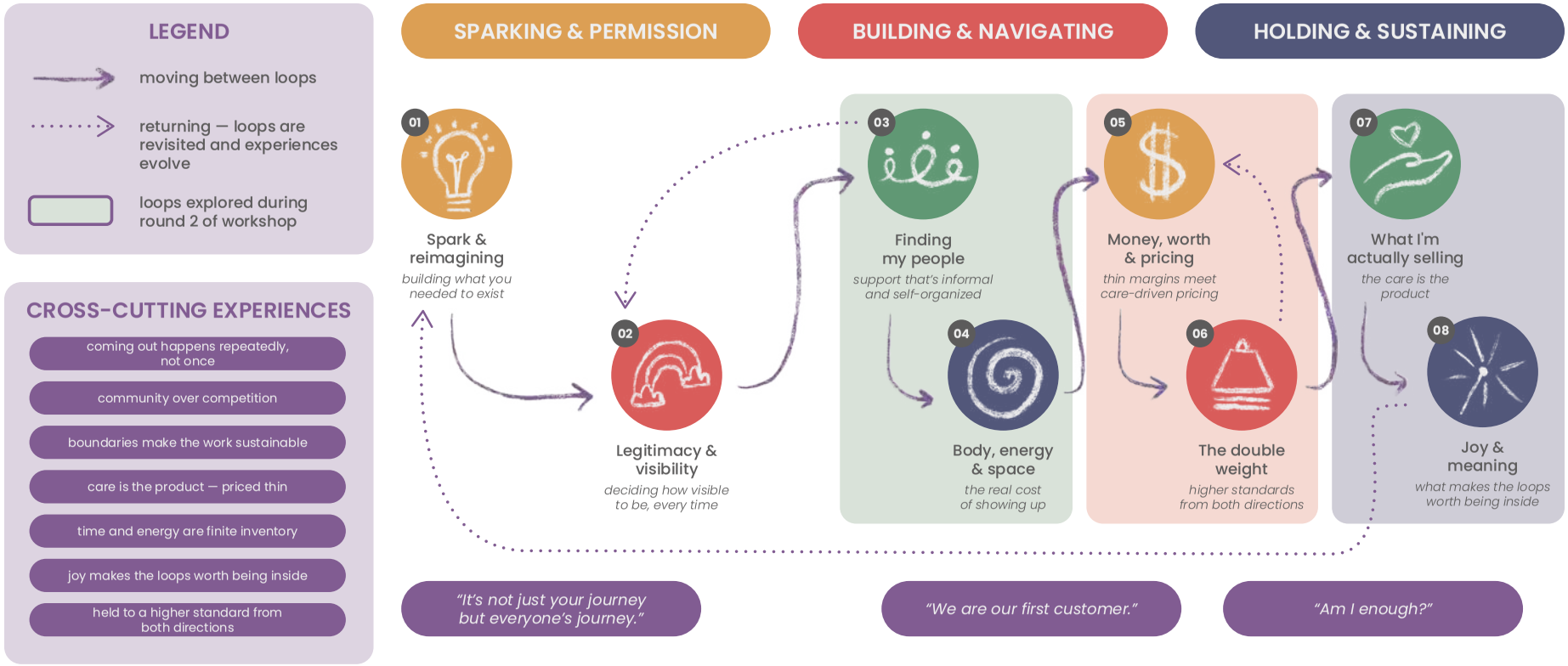
Six themes from the listening sessions were put to the room to validate, expand, or challenge:

- Being out isn't one decision. It's many.
- Often, the founder is the first customer.
- Care isn't a cost. It is the product.
- The double weight of being held to a higher standard from both directions.
- Thin margins meet care-driven pricing.
- How founders find mentorship, connection, and each other.

The verdict: accurate, and incomplete. The very first response named what was missing — intersectionality. This community is often doubly marginalized, and a single-axis reading misses the people carrying the most. That correction is why intersectionality appears in Part Three as its own implication rather than a caveat.

THE EIGHT LOOPS OF EXPERIENCE

Journey maps are usually straight lines. This one deliberately is not: the eight loops are revisited, lived several at a time, and connected by experiences that cut across all of them.





Phase one:
Sparking & permission

- **Spark & reimagining** – building what you needed to exist.
- **Legitimacy & visibility** – deciding how visible to be, every time.

Phase two:
Building & navigating

- **Finding my people** – support that's informal and self-organized.
- **Body, energy & space** – the real cost of showing up.
- **Money, worth & pricing** – thin margins meet care-driven pricing.
- **The double weight** – higher standards from both directions.

Phase three:
Holding & sustaining

- **What I'm actually selling** – the care is the product.
- **Joy & meaning** – what makes the loops worth being inside.

Seven experiences cut across all eight: coming out happens repeatedly; time and energy are finite inventory; community over competition; care is the product, priced thin; joy makes the loops worth being inside; boundaries make the work sustainable; higher standards from both directions.

PRACTICES FOUNDERS DESCRIBED THAT ARE WORKING

Each loop also carried a practice tested with the room. Together they read as a short field guide.

- **Hard-code the values.** Into the legal and governance structure from day one – for example: capped team size, limits or well consider approaches to growth, a business structure/legal form fitting the mission rather than the market.
- **Let credentials do the signalling.** Chamber memberships and professional affiliations filter for fit without a constant explicit statement.
- **Organize your own peer support.** Small check-in groups of two or three, exploration calls before launching, pairings outside any formal program.
- **Design for the body.** Sensory-aware access as a core feature, not an accommodation: quiet zones, requests honoured automatically.
- **Cross-subsidize deliberately.** Premium clients funding community-tier ones, or a profitable business funding a mission-oriented one.
- **Build internal vetting power.** Vendor curation with veto, refusing to host known harm-doers, documented internal standards.
- **Refuse work you cannot hold.** No projects outside your lived experience without a partner who has it. Values go into the work, not a website statement.
- **Resist the growth that costs you the work.** Several founders decline growth that would compromise what makes the work worth doing. The refusal to scale protects the meaning.

TENSIONS THE ROOM STOOD INSIDE

Three loops carried a spectrum. What surfaced is that there is no single community position on any of them – founders spread across the full range of each.

- **Visibility as currency ↔ Visibility as risk.** Being out connects you to clients, community and credibility – and can expose you.
- **Care-driven pricing ↔ Financial sustainability.** Meeting community where they are with accessible rates – while the business still has to survive.
- **Public solidarity ↔ Internal accountability.** Defending queer businesses publicly – while holding standards inside the community.

These are not problems solved once, but live negotiations founders re-run with each client, event, and shift in the political climate – which is why resources assuming a settled position will not fit.

DEEPER DIVES INTO SELECTED EXPERIENCE LOOPS

Three groups then chose the loops they had most to say about, writing for the future reader of the Chamber's resource guide.

Joy & meaning + What I'm actually selling

THE INSIGHT

When the founder is the product, boundaries are not self-care — they are the business model. What is sold is inseparable from who sells it, so the limits a founder sets determine whether the business survives.

WHAT LED THEM THERE

- You are ultimately selling yourself, so boundaries between work and social life go first and privacy gets harder to hold. It is an "always-on" lifestyle.
- Time is inventory: finite and worth calculating. People-pleasing has limits, and Alberta's political climate has cost real clientele.
- "We are our first customer" — community fuels the work, not all value is monetary, and joy can be a core value rather than only an outcome.

What they could not give up. Social acceptance and belonging; job security; and self-care built into operational planning rather than left to chance.

Money, worth & pricing + The double weight

THE INSIGHT

Scarcity is a story, not a market condition. The group named a belief shaped by capitalist and colonial systems — that "there can only be one" business serving a given community — and identified it as why a queer or Indigenous business reads as exclusionary rather than as a response to exclusion. Designing a space for a community takes nothing from anyone else.

WHAT LED THEM THERE

- "Leftism isn't a poverty cult": you can run an ethical business and still thrive. Sliding scales work, but only with a baseline price — your worth is not up for negotiation.
- Pricing communicates your position and values, so be clear about what clients receive — and challenge the assumption that queer and trans people cannot pay.
- Queer, racialized, disabled and other marginalized entrepreneurs face layered barriers. Competition is a capitalist distraction; uplift similar businesses instead.
- Queer communities feel pressure to be perfect. Hold yourself accountable without self-imprisonment, and speak from personal experience rather than for a whole community.

Finding my people + Body, energy & space

THE INSIGHT

Energy is inventory, and visibility is a cost line. This group treated capacity and safety as things to budget rather than endure – and named the trade-off underneath: finding your people requires being visible enough to be found.

WHAT LED THEM THERE

- Finding community is hard, especially in industries like construction. Being the only queer person in a workplace is isolating, and hiring carries risk when experienced workers bring harmful views.
- Energy fluctuates – treat it like inventory. You will never be fully "caught up"; take on what you have capacity for, and follow where your energy points.
- "Am I enough?" – you were given the opportunity for a reason. Inclusivity does not replace personal boundaries, and safety for yourself, your staff and your business comes first.

What they've had to give up. Constantly coming out – it happens repeatedly, not once. Anonymity as a business owner. Sometimes personal identity, to complete client work. And the hard decisions protecting both community and business.



PART 3: IMPLICATIONS FOR A RESOURCE GUIDE

Twelve things the research and workshop says a resource guide has to get right

The Chamber is building a digital resource guide for queer and trans entrepreneurs in Edmonton. The twelve implications below are what the workshop says that guide — and the wider ecosystem around it — needs to get right. Each one begins with what the room told us, and ends with the opportunity it opens up.

The first six describe what founders carry. The next four describe where the ecosystem falls short. The last two describe what this community is already building without help.

WHAT FOUNDERS CARRY

The patterns in this section describe the lived weight of queer and trans entrepreneurship in Edmonton. They are the ground any resource stands on: get these wrong, and even a well-designed guide will miss.

1. **Permission is self-made, not granted**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- Across the first two stations, founders described permission as something that never arrived from outside. One wrote about forcing a way in rather than finding permission; another about locating permission only within themselves; a third — an Indigenous founder — about refusing on principle to seek permission to exist on their own traditional lands, and passing that stance on to young Indigenous and queer people. Others described the quieter inner work: unlearning the belief that people like them do not become business owners, and moving through impostor feelings toward acknowledging their own competence. The listening sessions frame the same pattern from the other side: these founders built the infrastructure they themselves needed to exist.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Open with affirmation, not instruction. Resources land differently when they are framed as tools for a permission founders already hold, rather than gates to qualify through. Onboarding language, eligibility framing, and tone throughout the guide can all carry this.

2. **Visibility is currency and risk at the same time**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- One contribution named it precisely: visibility operates as currency and as risk simultaneously — polarized extremes lived at once, not a dial founders settle. Others filled in both sides. Being visibly trans described as a professional superpower. Choosing visibility not for oneself but for those who might be emboldened by seeing it. Visibility in male-dominated, straight, cis industries treated as the very foundation of the work. And alongside all of it: visibility bringing hate as well as connection, and the pressure of not feeling queer enough for the room. The spectrum exercise showed founders positioned across the entire range.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Never assume disclosure. Resources should let founders control when and how they are visible — signalling safety rather than requiring outness, and avoiding designs where accessing support outs someone by default.

3. **The double standard disciplines from both sides**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- Founders validated the double weight finding emphatically, with stacked agreement notes at the station. Contributions described being held to a higher standard in everything, with accountability culture harsher inside the community because members are expected to know better; a real fear of being cast out by one's own progressive community; and the internalized version — holding oneself to a standard no outside critic could match. One founder credited a professional background in crisis communications with repeatedly saving the business. One group turned the finding into guidance: hold yourself accountable without self-imprisonment, allow mistakes, and speak from personal experience rather than on behalf of a whole community.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Pair every accountability resource with grace. Content on handling public mistakes, community conflict, and reputational pressure belongs in the guide — written to loosen the narrower band of tolerable error, not tighten it.

4. **Intersectionality multiplies both barriers and expectations**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- The room's very first response to the listening themes was that intersectionality was the missing element — that this community is often doubly marginalized. The stations bore it out. Tokenization and erasure described as happening simultaneously. An Indigenous-owned business held to a different standard while also being treated in a patronizing way. Living at many intersections named as carrying responsibilities with real financial cost. The deeper dives extended the point: queer, racialized, and disabled entrepreneurs face layered barriers that a single-axis lens cannot see.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Make the guide intersectional by default. Resources addressed to a generic queer founder will miss the people carrying the most. Where a recommendation lands differently for Indigenous, racialized, or disabled founders, say so explicitly.

5. **Energy is a business input**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- One group's discussion read like a founder-written playbook on energy. Energy rises and falls, but the work

does not stop — so drop the expectation that it be the same every day. You will never be fully caught up; take on what you have capacity for. Set boundaries around what is worth the energy, especially when showing up in spaces that are not aligned. Follow where the energy points, because work should support the life you want. Others added the embodied version: a neurodivergent founder described masking through an extrovert's job and needing spaces where the mask can come off; another described showing up as inseparable from simply being, with no off switch available.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Treat energy management as core business content — alongside cash flow and marketing, not as a wellness garnish. Founders' own framings, paraphrased, could anchor a section of the guide written for the people doing the work.

6. **Joy is load-bearing — and contested**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- The room did not agree about joy, and the disagreement is itself the finding. One founder wrote of having no joy, only purpose. Another wrote of refusing to trade an easier life for one filled with purpose, looking forward to work daily and finding ways to keep it playful.

Others located joy concretely: in the flexibility to meet community members where they are, in watching clients visibly soften once they know they are safe and valued, in operating according to one's values and adding value to other people's lives. Several noted the economics: the most joy-inducing offerings are often the ones that do not make money, and the balance between joy, recovery, and income is an open negotiation.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Present joy as a reason and a resource without romanticizing it. The guide can honour purpose-driven endurance and joy-driven work as two real modes of sustainability — and should not imply that founders who feel only purpose are doing it wrong.

WHERE THE ECOSYSTEM FALLS SHORT

These implications point outward — to funders, support organizations, institutions, and the systems that shape the environment members are operating in.

7. **Mainstream connection infrastructure fails these founders**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- The listening sessions found that formal, application-heavy mentorship filters out exactly the people it is meant to serve, and the room validated it. Founders described first networking events as isolating and dominated by a tech-bro culture, against which later connections with queer- and women-owned businesses felt authentic. Industry boards were described as filled with large corporate, non-queer representatives following a single business model. Several wrote of feeling placeless at standard events and wanting more opportunities to connect with like-minded queer business owners — while also naming the catch: you have to be brave enough to be visible and tell your story to find your people, and visibility sometimes brings hate.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Fund and legitimize the informal. Small peer check-in circles, relational pairings, low-friction introductions, and a visible directory of queer-owned businesses will do more than another program with an application form. The guide can name what does not work as clearly as what does.

8. **The wealth gap is also a network and knowledge gap**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- The listening sessions documented thinner margins and disproportionately less family wealth at the start. One contribution widened the lens: generational wealth is not the only missing inheritance — networks, and access to knowledgeable professionals, are part of what is not handed down. A related contribution noted how hard it is to establish trust without association with formal institutions, and it drew explicit agreement from others in the room.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Brokered access to professionals — legal, accounting, banking, leasing — may matter as much as capital. The guide can pair funding resources with vetted, community-competent professional connections.

9. **Community pricing is founder-financed**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- Sliding scales and community rates appeared all across the pricing station, always financed the

same way: personally. Founders described charging those who can afford more to offset those who cannot; pricing to industry standards but routinely discounting for community members who could not otherwise access the service; wanting programming to be free for everyone while still needing to pay rent; and questioning whether lowering prices for marginalized clients is survivable without a stable client base. One contribution named the structure directly: ethical pricing carries a financial burden on owners that conventional capital models never price in — and yet turning people away over cost would run counter to the entire purpose.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- The community discount is a subsidy founders provide out of pocket. Funders and institutions can subsidize the subsidy: community-rate top-up funds, space cost relief, and institutional purchasing at full rate. The guide should say this plainly to its funding audience.

10. **Founders are pre-financing systemic gaps**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- Read together, the patterns above describe founders personally absorbing costs the surrounding system does not cover: discounted pricing for communities the market excludes, unpaid educational labour in unaligned spaces, extra error-proofing against a narrower band of tolerable mistakes, and the named financial weight of living at many intersections. Individually each is a business decision. Together they are an invoice the ecosystem is quietly handing to the people least able to carry it.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Name the absorbed costs explicitly. A guide that only teaches founders to cope leaves the invoice with them. Recommendations aimed at funders, institutions, and the City should be framed as moving these costs back where they belong.

WHAT FOUNDERS ARE BUILDING ANYWAY

The final implications describe what this community is already creating — assets to be amplified rather than replaced.

11. **Care and belonging are the product**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- Asked what they are actually selling, founders wrote about the opportunity to be part of a community of care; spaces where clients and vendors can be themselves and find community together; belonging, connection, and the chance to change how things are done. One founder working in personal transformation described being inseparable from the product itself — rewarding and stressful at once. A team whose members are all disabled and gender-diverse described access not as accommodation but as co-creation: imagination, relational decision-making, and adaptation as a way of life. The listening sessions put it structurally: strip out the care and the offering collapses.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Treat space, safety, and sensory design as business infrastructure. For landlords and service providers, these are commercial requirements of care-based businesses — the conditions under which the product can exist — not amenities or favours.

12. **Success is treated as resistance**

WHAT THE ROOM TOLD US

- A recurring stance across the money, selling, and joy stations treats thriving itself as the point to prove. Founders wrote about demonstrating that doing the right thing can be profitable even with less room at the table; about refusing the expectation of being a poor business owner because one is queer, trans, and fighting the system; about keeping people above profits while still chasing sustainability; and about joy operating as a currency alongside money. The deeper-dive groups sharpened it into advice for the guide's future reader: recognize and never second-guess the value you bring to your work.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIENCE

- Frame success stories as evidence of possibility, not exceptions. The guide can make thriving legible as a community outcome — proof that ethical, identity-centred businesses succeed — rather than presenting survival as the ceiling.

PART 4: OVERARCHING OBSERVATIONS

Patterns that emerge across the phases of this work.

The three observations in this part step back from any single phase of the work and look across the whole arc — the primer, the workshop, and the implications for the resource guide. Each is a pattern that becomes visible only when the phases are held together. They are offered by the project team as synthesis rather than as individual participant statements.



THREE PATTERNS POINT TOWARD A DIFFERENT MODEL OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Queer entrepreneurs are reaching for Horizon 3

A reminder on the horizons: Horizon 1 is the way things work now, Horizon 2 is the innovation already emerging, and Horizon 3 is the future we actually want — a business ecosystem where identity is no longer a barrier to economic participation.

The workshop was deliberately scoped to Horizons 1 and 2. Yet one group, dwelling in Joy & meaning and What I'm actually selling, spontaneously reflected on post-capitalist possibilities and what business could look like beyond traditional models. That matters because the project's most speculative frames — Entrepreneurship as Emancipation, and Redefining What Success Means, both in Part One — were offered cautiously, as generative lenses rather than settled findings. The workshop suggests they are not merely theoretical: given room, participants travel to Horizon 3 on their own.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEMBERS AND WHAT THE CHAMBER IS LEARNING

Visionary framing is something this community already does, not something imposed on it. Future sessions — and the resource guide itself — can safely make more space for Horizon 3 thinking without worrying that it is ahead of where members are.

The "first customer" shifted tense

The founder-as-first-customer is not an origin story. It is a description of what keeps the business running now.

In the listening sessions it was framed as a beginning: the thing you needed didn't exist, so you built it. In the deeper dives, a group used the same words in the present tense — "we are our first customer" — describing community and connection as what fuels the work today. The idea moved from a story about why the business started to a claim about why it keeps going. That is a small grammatical shift with a real design consequence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEMBERS AND WHAT THE CHAMBER IS LEARNING

Resources framed only around founding motivation will miss founders years into the work. The guide can speak to the first-customer relationship as ongoing — something founders continue to draw on, and continue to owe themselves — rather than a chapter that closes at launch.

Redefining success through boundaries

Every boundary named in the workshop is a success metric in disguise.

Read on their own, the limits each group described — you cannot satisfy everyone, safety comes first, protect your energy, refuse the growth that would compromise the work — look like a wellness theme sitting beside the business content. Read against Redefining What Success Means in Part One, they look like something else entirely: the practical mechanism by which founders enact a different definition of success. A boundary is a decision about what the business is for and what it will not sacrifice. The refusal to scale, named at the Joy & meaning station as the protection of meaning, is the clearest case of it.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEMBERS AND WHAT THE CHAMBER IS LEARNING

Boundary-setting is core business strategy — the how of community-centred success — rather than something to file under self-care. That framing also gives funders and institutions a way to read "small on purpose" as a legitimate business model instead of a failure to grow.

WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

What participants contributed becomes source material for the Chamber's digital resource guide — practical resources and recommendations for businesses, service providers, and the City. The next steps named at the session's close carry the work forward: bringing stakeholders together to reflect on what was heard; collaborating with the Chamber on potential opportunities; sharing outcomes back with members; and continuing the work through networking and community connection.

To every entrepreneur who walked the stations, placed a dot, filled a sticky, and stayed in the harder conversations: this report exists because of your generosity.



PART 5: STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

What ecosystem partners made of the findings, and what happens next.

On September 16, 2026, the draft findings were brought to organizations that shape Edmonton's entrepreneurial ecosystem: the Chamber, Action Lab, the City of Edmonton's Beyond Belonging Strategy, and community business associations and consultants. This part summarizes what they took from the research, where they see room to act, and where the work goes from here.

WHAT STAKEHOLDERS TOLD US

Stakeholders reviewed the findings, tested them against their own experience, and looked at where they hold influence. Seven themes stood out.

This research fills a gap

Little research exists that specifically explores the experiences of queer and trans entrepreneurs. Edmonton's experiences are not entirely different from those in other Canadian cities, but this project has captured perspectives that are not reflected elsewhere. The gap between entrepreneurs generally and queer and trans entrepreneurs is not simply about market access. It is about how identity, community, and systemic barriers shape the experience of running a business.

Care creates value that systems do not see

Many of these businesses emerge to meet unmet community needs: to provide care, fill service gaps, and support their communities. Traditional business systems do not always recognize or support this kind of value. Mentorship is largely informal and community-driven, found through trusted networks rather than traditional business development spaces.

Financing is not built for these businesses

Asked why so few founders access traditional financing, stakeholders pointed to four reasons:

- Many businesses do not meet funding eligibility requirements.
- Entrepreneurs are often required to self-fund.
- Some founders have been turned away from financing opportunities.
- Access to power, networks, and privilege influences funding outcomes.

Banks focus on stability, profitability, and repayment, while community-oriented businesses often carry broader purposes. Few institutions offer a meaningful alternative, and grants are specialized and difficult to navigate. Many young queer and trans entrepreneurs lack the established relationships and mentorship needed to find their way through.

Redesign the systems, not the founders

Existing systems were built through particular perspectives and assumptions, and they often reinforce barriers for people with different lived experiences. Many stakeholders expressed the need to rethink and redesign

systems rather than adapt individuals to fit within them.

Inclusive spaces benefit everyone

On whether allies have a place in the Chamber, the conversation moved from identity alone toward values alignment. Welcoming and affirming spaces for queer and trans entrepreneurs often create conditions that benefit everyone, and inclusive business practices can strengthen entire communities.

Procurement is a lever

Large contracts can shut smaller businesses out. Stakeholders discussed breaking large contracts into smaller opportunities, creating pathways for diverse-owned businesses to bid, and looking at sectors such as snow clearing, custodial services, and maintenance. Procurement is constrained by broader agreements and regulations, which makes local preference difficult, but there was strong interest in continuing to explore it.

Change starts inside our own organizations

Stakeholders asked what barriers exist within their own organizations, how costs, fees, and subsidy structures limit participation, and who currently benefits from entrepreneurial support programs. They emphasized combining stories, research, and data to support policy and program change.

Main takeaway

Queer and trans founders are building viable, community-rooted businesses while personally absorbing costs that are often created by the broader ecosystem.



The stakeholder review workshop, September 16, 2026

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

The session closed with a shared starting point: everyone in the room wants to see a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem. These are the next steps and the questions that remain open.

What the Chamber is building

- **A digital toolkit.** An interactive resource guide, intended to remain a living resource that community members can keep adding to and strengthening over time.
- **Sharing the work.** The next phase involves publishing the findings with the broader community and building awareness of them.
- **Deeper research.** Additional funding would support further conversations with entrepreneurs, including interviews, videos, and topic-specific explorations.
- **A connection to City resources.** Stakeholders discussed the potential for the resource guide to be linked to City of Edmonton resources and platforms.

What the Chamber hopes partners will carry forward

- Stronger relationships and connections
- Opportunities for collaboration
- Funding and grant opportunities
- Expanded support for queer and trans entrepreneurs

Questions for anyone who shapes this ecosystem

- What would your community lose if one of these businesses closed?
- How much support can people access without needing to publicly identify themselves?
- How much of the cost can be moved away from the founder?
- Where does your work assume one is enough?
- How much power do you have over who gets invited in?
- When it gets worse, who stands up, and what is your organization actually able to do?
- Who is not in the room, and who do we need stronger relationships with?

With thanks to the community partners, City networks, the Edmonton Community Foundation, and Action Lab, who hosted and convened this work.