



What is Emancipatory Entrepreneurship?

Building a 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub

Emancipatory entrepreneurship goes beyond traditional views of business as solely profit-driven, instead positioning it as a tool for liberation, especially for marginalized groups like the 2SLGBTQI+ community. This perspective recognizes how entrepreneurship can address systemic barriers and foster self-determination. The 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (REKH) is actively researching and developing resources to support entrepreneurs in Canada, focusing on intersectional experiences and a community-centered approach.

What is Emancipatory Entrepreneurship?

When most people think about an entrepreneur, they imagine an individual risk-taker spotting a gap in the market and creating a business to fill it. While this view focuses on economic opportunities and profits, it misses something important: many entrepreneurs start businesses to break free from barriers that hold them back. **Emancipatory entrepreneurship** is an alternative perspective that reframes how we understand business creation. Rather than seeing entrepreneurship solely as the pursuit of profit, this perspective recognizes it as a tool for liberation.

Emancipatory entrepreneurship shifts our focus from simply identifying market opportunities to removing constraints that limit people's freedom and potential. These constraints can be economic (lack of funding), social (discrimination), or psychological (feeling like you don't belong). 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.

Successful entrepreneurship involves not only "breaking free" from immediate barriers that limit opportunities, but also "breaking up" the broader systems that create those barriers in the first place. Entrepreneurs can prioritize ethical practices, such as inclusive hiring and fair compensation. These individual acts ripple outwards as they challenge industry norms and demonstrate viable alternatives to the status quo. More broadly, an emancipatory lens underscores the importance of non-economic dimensions, including identity, family, stability, wellness, and solidarity. This holistic approach leads individuals and communities to thrive on their own terms.

2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship and Emancipation

In the past few decades, 2SLGBTQI+ businesses have served as critical sites of community, culture, identity, and resistance. From bookstores to bars and cafes to professional services, these businesses provided safe spaces where queer people could express their authentic selves, as well as find refuge from broader society. It's also where queer communities first became visible and politically organized. Many early 2SLGBTQI+ protests often centered on the right to gather in public places or circulate publications. For instance, the police raids of Toronto's gay bathhouses in 1981 united entrepreneurs and activists, resulting in a watershed moment for rights and recognition of 2SLGBTQI+ Canadians.

Through ongoing advocacy, queer spaces have slowly transformed from sites of stigma and marginalization to legitimate venues of both **commerce and community**. Today, this legacy continues. Many 2SLGBTQI+ businesses strengthen their communities by providing safe spaces and identity-affirming services, platforms for community events, products tailored to fill specific needs, and wealth redistribution by supporting other queer-owned businesses.

Despite much progress, 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs still face unique challenges that need to be addressed at both the individual and systemic levels:

Responding to workplace discrimination: Many 2SLGBTQI+ individuals turn to entrepreneurship after negative experiences in traditional workplaces. Starting a business becomes a way to create safer working environments and improve their economic potential.

Managing 2SLGBTQI+ identity and visibility: Many 2SLGBTQI+ people face complex decisions about when to be visible about their identity and when to remain private. Some entrepreneurs integrate their queer identity directly into their brand or products, while others separate their personal and professional lives. Each option carries both potential costs and benefits. Concealing one's identity might help secure financing or find clients; however, it can lead to emotional strain and isolation. Disclosure might put one at risk of discrimination or even compromise personal safety. Yet visibility can connect entrepreneurs to supportive networks and provide positive role models for the 2SLGBTQI+ community.

Navigating intersectionality: 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs often stand at the crossroads of multiple identities, including gender, ethnicity, class, disability, location, or language. Intersectionality recognizes how different aspects of identity create unique patterns of advantage and disadvantage. These overlapping identities aren't simply additive; they shape distinct entrepreneurial journeys that require tailored supports and resources. One significant factor is geography, with vastly different experiences between urban centers—typically more liberal and inclusive— and rural or remote areas—with smaller (though sometimes more cohesive) networks of support and mentorship. Similarly, immigrant, Francophone, or religious communities might hold more conservative attitudes towards 2SLGBTQI+ people. Entrepreneurs might need to choose between concealing their queer identity to access valuable cultural networks and financial capital, or being out but potentially losing support from family and friends. Intersectional dynamics are also salient *within* the 2SLGBTQI+ community. A queer entrepreneur of color might participate in an incubator for 2SLGBTQI+ founders, but find that their cohort lacks racial diversity.

Balancing assimilation and liberation: A profound tension for many 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs is whether to adapt to mainstream business practices or to challenge them—to navigate the system from within, or find alternatives outside of it. At its core, queerness has been about questioning what society considers "normal." This ethos uniquely positions 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs to imagine entirely different models of entrepreneurship that integrate the needs and values of marginalized communities. Queer entrepreneurs don't just build businesses; they can create new ways of working, leading, and organizing that benefit everyone.

The Community-Centered Approach

The 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (REKH), funded by the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC), is conducting research and developing resources to support 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs across Canada. Our team strives to put community voices at the center of our work. Rather than imposing solutions from the top-down, we are learning from and listening to the experiences of diverse 2SLGBTQI+ people. Our approach is shaped by several key principles from emancipatory entrepreneurship:

Recognizing intersectional experiences: To ensure that 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub serves everyone, we deliberately seek out entrepreneurs whose experiences are often overlooked, particularly those from Indigenous, rural, and Francophone communities.

Building on strengths: We reject a deficit-based approach that treats marginalized groups as "problems" to be fixed. Instead, we celebrate queer joy—the resilience, creativity, and unique perspectives that 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs bring to their work, life, and community. A holistic view acknowledges the whole person; it considers psychological and emotional resources like self-confidence, resilience, and connection. This strength-based approach informs the tools and resources we are developing that address community-identified barriers while also leveraging existing capabilities and networks.

Reciprocity and sustainability: The 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub draws on community-centered research methodologies that recognize diverse ways of knowing and emphasize reciprocity and responsibility. Our team has been connecting 2SLGBTQI+ organizations and individuals across Canada through fieldwork, networking events, an advisory council, and regional partnerships. We are giving back to the community by sharing accessible reports and resources. Through these relationships, we hope to build long-term sustainability to maintain the Hub's services beyond the initial funding period.

Research in Action

The 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub is advancing both academic knowledge and practical solutions through several key initiatives:

- **Mapping the 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurial landscape:** We are conducting a comprehensive scoping review of existing research on 2SLGBTQI+ employment and entrepreneurship in Canada. This involves systematically analyzing academic publications, reports, media, and policy documents to identify what we already know and what critical gaps remain.

- **Challenging stereotypes:** Through focus groups using a persona methodology, we're examining how traditional images of entrepreneurs (often portrayed as straight, white, male risk-takers) affect 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs and how these stereotypes can be disrupted.
- **Field research across Canada:** We're speaking directly with 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs and support organizations across different regions to map entrepreneurial ecosystems and document lived experiences, barriers, and opportunities. By capturing distinct regional experiences, we can identify both common needs and context-specific solutions.
- **Practical resources:** Based on our findings, we're developing a national bilingual database of resources and creating materials tailored to the specific needs of diverse 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs.

At its core, emancipatory entrepreneurship asks: How can we build businesses that don't just succeed within existing systems, but help create more equitable communities? The 2SLGBTQI+ Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub is connecting academic research with community wisdom and translating both into accessible resources. By examining how 2SLGBTQI+ entrepreneurs navigate unique challenges related to identity, visibility, community, and geography, we also contribute to broader knowledge about entrepreneurship while creating practical pathways to success for equity-deserving communities.

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