

# Lead with Pride: Best Practices for Advancing 2SLGBTQIA+ Leadership



Presented by Pride at Work Canada

# Acknowledgements

This report was made possible by the collective work of many individuals and organizations. These include but are not limited to:

Many Two-Spirit, queer, and trans leaders who shared their personal and professional experiences with us

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The Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business

## Land acknowledgment

Pride at Work Canada/Fierté au travail Canada works across northern Turtle Island, on the traditional territories of the First Nations people, Métis nations, and Inuit, which includes Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ Indigenous people. We recognize there are multiple barriers that impact Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ Indigenous people from accessing meaningful, affirming, and inclusive employment. In our work, we look to reduce those barriers and are open to feedback from Indigenous workers, employers, and job seekers in making this driving factor a reality.

This research was primarily conducted in and near Tsi Tkarón:to/ Toronto. These lands and waters are the traditional homes and territories of – and cared for by – the Anishinaabek, Huron-Wendat, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Today, Toronto is home to Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and beyond, including many Afro-Indigenous, Urban Indigenous, Two-Spirit, queer, and trans Indigenous peoples. Toronto is situated within the lands protected by the Dish with One Spoon wampum treaty held between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek. All Torontonians are treaty people with responsibilities tied to Treaty 13, signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Williams Treaties (Clause 2), signed with multiple Mississauga and Chippewa bands, as well as the 1764 Covenant Chain wampum belt, a long-standing agreement between Aboriginal people and the British Crown.

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# Note from Pride at Work Canada

## We haven't always been visible. But we've always been here.

Generations of 2SLGBTQIA+ people survived, even prospered, by concealing their identities. Many of today's queer and trans leaders entered the workforce before employment protections on the grounds of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation existed in Canada.

Over the past few decades, there has been a steady increase in visible representation of out 2SLGBTQIA+ people in Canada's labour market. But, on average, that visibility has not brought with it higher wages, secure employment, or the sense of dignity queer and trans people deserve to have at work.

The people we spoke to in this study described arduous journeys to their positions of leadership. Even more shared that they started off without a template for success: they had never seen a leader "like them" before. They forged their own paths, often in the face of enormous obstacles.

Pride at Work Canada has been helping employers create safer and more affirming workplaces for our communities for fifteen years. Since 2020 we have broadened the scope of our work to include direct support for queer and trans people seeking to advance in the workplace. We believe that investing in 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders will yield the greatest return for our communities and for Canada.

## Because now we're visible. And we're not going anywhere.

Colin Druhan  
Executive Director  
Pride at Work Canada

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# Glossary

This report uses the acronym **2SLGBTQIA+** (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and the plus which recognizes the many identities people have). This acronym was chosen in order to centre the lives and legacies of Indigenous people and enhance the visibility of underrepresented identities. Variations of this acronym are used when quoting research participants and other studies to retain the original language.

This report avoids the use of **BIPOC** and instead refers to the specific communities and individual identities involved in this research, based on the self-identification of Black, Indigenous, and racialized participants. The term **racialized** is used to refer to common experiences among participants who identified as Latin American, South American, East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern

## Code-Switching

Adjusting how one expresses themselves and behaves in order to fit into and be safe in an environment, according to what dominant culture considers to be “appropriate” behaviours and norms - often based on negative stereotypes of Black people and other marginalized groups.

## Gender Expression

How a person publicly expresses or presents their gender. This can include behaviour and outward appearance such as dress, hair, make-up, body language, and voice. A person’s chosen name and pronouns are also common ways of expressing gender. All people, regardless of their gender identity, have a gender expression and they may express it in any number of ways.

## Gender Identity

A person’s internal and individual experience of gender. It is a person’s sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person’s gender identity may be the same as or different from their sex assignment at birth.

## Gender Norms

The gender binary influences what society considers “normal” or acceptable behaviour, appearance, and roles for women and men. Gender norms contribute to power imbalances and gender inequality in the home, at work, and in communities. This report also uses the term **cis-hetero norms** (cisgender heteronormativity), referring to society’s assumption that being cisgender and heterosexual is the norm.

## Equity-Deserving Group

Those who face barriers to equal access, opportunities, and resources due to historic and structural discrimination and violence - including racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, sexism, and xenophobia - which limit equal participation in society and the economy.

## Intersectionality

A term coined by Black feminist legal scholar Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the ways in which our identities (such as race, gender, class, disability, etc.) intersect to create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. This report also uses the term **multiple marginalized identities** to capture individuals’ experiences of facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

## Microaggressions

Subtle and often unintentional expressions of bias or prejudice that marginalize and insult individuals from equity-deserving groups. They might seem like a compliment (“You’re beautiful for a transgender girl”), a harmless comment (“Where are you really from?”), or a subconscious action (crossing the street to avoid a racialized person).

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1 \_\_\_\_\_ The 519 Glossary of Terms.

The 519 Community Centre is located in Toronto, Ontario that provides services to the LGBTQ+ community. It is well-positioned to provide definitions on 2SLGBTQIA+ terminology because it has been providing community-led services to the LGBTQ+ community for over 40 years. Available from <https://www.the519.org/education-training/glossary/#E>; The Micropedia of Microaggressions. The first encyclopaedia of microaggressions. (n.d.). Available from <https://www.themicropedia.org/#/>

# Executive Summary

In collaboration with our community and partners, Pride at Work Canada undertook a study on 2SLGBTQIA+ senior and executive leadership across multiple industries and sectors - the first study of its kind in Canada. **Lead with Pride: Best Practices for Advancing 2SLGBTQIA+ Leadership** features an analysis of the career pathways and experiences of 23 queer and trans leaders, as well as the workplace practices of 13 private, public, and non-profit sector employers, to establish an understanding of the barriers, supports, and opportunities for queer and trans professionals to reach leadership positions in Canada. This study used an intersectional analysis and intentionally features the voices of trans and queer leaders who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled, and who have immigrant backgrounds.

Through conversations with 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders and private, public, and non-profit sector employers, this study found that queer and trans professionals face numerous barriers in their career journeys that slow their career progression, limit their opportunities, and obscure potential pathways to leadership levels. This study also found that while opportunities exist to improve talent retention, leadership pipeline development, and upper-level recruitment, these are largely overlooked in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

## Key Findings:

All 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders in this study reported experiencing discrimination and marginalization throughout their careers due to prevalent homophobia and transphobia. For some leaders, this was compounded with racism, sexism, and/or ableism.

Discrimination became less pronounced for some leaders as they rose to higher ranks, but for some trans, non-binary, Black, and Indigenous leaders, discrimination is still prevalent at the leadership level.

Discrimination resulted in slowed career progression and created challenges for career planning, as most leaders in this study reported having to make lateral career movements for safety rather than for a planned upward trajectory.

Factors like discrimination, a lack of employer investment, and a lack of advancement opportunities all create challenges for the retention of 2SLGBTQIA+ talent.

2SLGBTQIA+ professionals have limited access to professional mentorship, sponsorship, and networking opportunities, and those who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled are less likely to have access to these supports.

Despite having less access to professional mentorship, all leaders in this study reported acting as mentors and/or sponsors for aspiring leaders now.

The lived experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders - including those who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled or neurodivergent - strengthened their leadership skills and styles to be more effective.

Based on these findings, this report includes eight recommendations for employers to increase retention, advancement, and recruitment of 2SLGBTQIA+ talent in order to benefit from strong diversity and inclusion at the leadership level. The recommendations include strategies for 2SLGBTQIA+ talent retention and advancement, developing a culture of mentorship and sponsorship, developing a culture of accommodation, strengthening Employee Resource Groups as spaces of solidarity, valuing DEI workloads and shifting accountability, mapping employee journeys, working with inclusive service providers for leader development, and improving upper-level recruitment and leadership pipeline development.

Additional tools for aspiring 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders to guide mentoring relationships and board recruitment processes, and a collection of identity-based strengths and assets in 2SLGBTQIA+ leadership will be available on Pride at Work Canada's website.

[PRIDEATWORK.CA](https://prideatwork.ca)

# Introduction

After decades of work on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace, 2SLGBTQIA+ communities are still largely underrepresented at leadership levels in corporate Canada (MacDougall et al., 2022; The Prosperity Project, 2023) - particularly those who are trans, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled. In common practice, DEI work largely focuses on awareness training and education campaigns, anti-bias hiring practices, and allyship programs; however, while diversity in entry and mid-levels is improving with these efforts, representation drops off significantly for multiple equity-deserving groups in upper levels across industries and sectors (Diversity Institute, 2020).

Pathways to leadership for 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals are often unclear, barriered, or non-existent. Homophobia and transphobia, sometimes compounded with racism and ableism, create additional challenges for aspiring queer and trans leaders as they try to access development opportunities, career supports, and upper-level positions (Silva & Warren, 2019; Medina & Mahowald, 2023; Sears et al., 2021). This compound discrimination is related to the intersectionality of one's identity, as one may have multiple identities that carry marginalization and discrimination - e.g., those who are queer and racialized or disabled face discrimination associated with each of these factors. This results in queer and trans professionals, especially those with multiple marginalized identities, being less likely to see themselves represented in leadership and weakens their career outcomes. Despite this, 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals are just as likely to aspire to leadership positions as their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

Employers in Canada have a direct role to play in closing these gaps and creating workplaces

where all individuals can show up with confidence and achieve their full potential at work, regardless of gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Investing in meaningful 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion and visibility at senior and executive levels enhances retention, strengthens leadership pipelines, and allows employers to harness the potential of a wider and more diverse talent pool (Brand, 2022; Ceron, 2022). In order to achieve this, employers must be aware of and remove the barriers that queer and trans professionals face along their career paths. Employers must also recognize and address the intersectional nature of discrimination and systemic barriers faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals who are also racialized, disabled, or hold other marginalized identities, in order to create truly inclusive and equitable workplaces.

Queer and trans professionals face discrimination when entering, establishing, and advancing their careers. For example, 30% of 2SLGBTQIA+ people in Canada leave their workplaces because they feel unwelcome or unsupported by management (Egale, 2022). Additionally, in the Ontario Trans PULSE survey, 28% of respondents were either fired because they were trans or believed they may have been fired as a result of their trans identity. And 50% were turned down for a job or suspected they were turned down for a job because they were trans (Bauer & Scheim, 2015). In the United States, racialized 2SLGBTQIA+ employees also face compound discrimination, as has been shown in a study by the Williams Institute that found that 29% of LGBTQ employees of colour reported not being hired based on their identities compared to 18% of white LGBTQ employees (Sears et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies in the U.S. found that queer and Black employees are less likely to receive career support and mentorship opportunities in their workplaces (Fosbrook et al., 2020; Imoagene, 2018).



Both subtle and blatant forms of homophobia and transphobia are common in corporate and leadership environments and constrain the career choices of 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals in Canada, causing wage inequalities, job insecurity, and reduced job mobility (Brennan et al., 2022). In these environments, retention of 2SLGBTQIA+ talent is challenging, and queer and trans professionals have limited opportunities to advance to senior and executive levels - with most existing pathways requiring assimilation into a dominant workplace and leadership culture.

Leadership norms in Canada are influenced by norms in society that associate professionalism with the characteristics of white, cisgender, heterosexual men (Mungaray & Curtin, 2019). This causes 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders to be seen as unfit or less appropriate for leadership roles and forces them to conceal and downplay parts of themselves at work. In a global study based out of the U.S. by Out Leadership, of the 58% of LGBTQ+ employees that hide their identities at work, 70% stated their primary reason for doing so was concern about not being promoted. In this study, trans professionals and those who are Black, Indigenous, and racialized were more likely to cover their identities than their cisgender and white peers (Sears et al., 2021; Sears & Barry-Moran, 2020). This identity management requires a significant amount of mental energy and prevents queer and trans professionals from being their authentic selves at work, a compromise that most cisgender and heterosexual leaders do not have to make.

While there is legislation that aims to protect 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals in the workplace, there are few legislative instruments that contribute to meaningful workplace inclusion and pathways to leadership. The Canadian Human Rights Act (CHRA) prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in the workplace and applies to federally regulated industries, and many provinces have their own human rights legislations which prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in employment. These legislations provide important legal protection for 2SLGBTQIA+

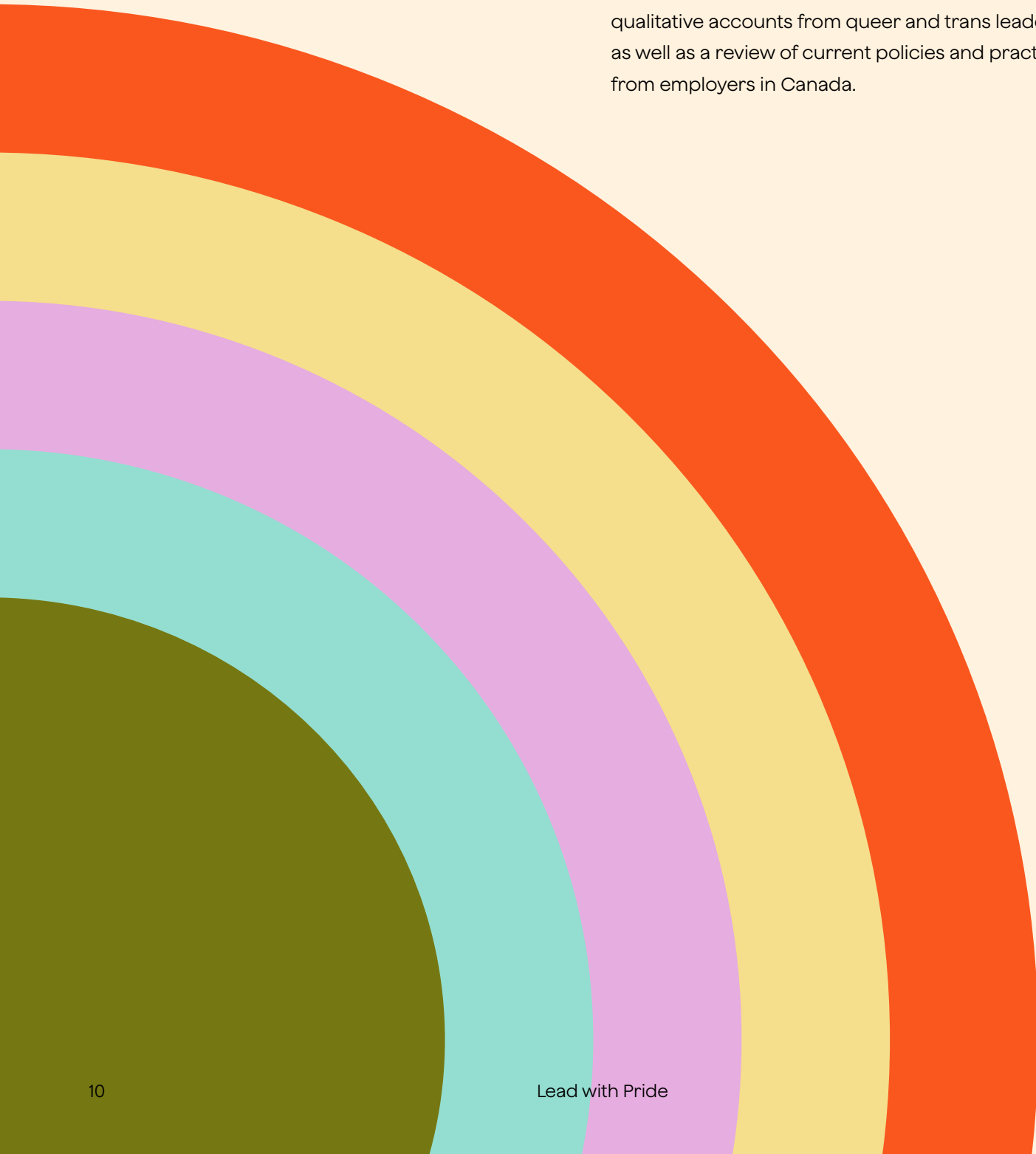
individuals at work and in other areas of life, but do not require organizations to engage meaningfully in inclusion work or to increase representation in leadership. Much of this work must be done in the workplace through both internal efforts and commitments to initiatives, such as **the 50-30 Challenge** - an initiative launched by the Government of Canada in 2020 that aims to increase diversity and inclusion on boards of directors and in senior management of Canadian organizations. This voluntary challenge encourages organizations to achieve gender parity (50%) and significant representation (30%) of other underrepresented groups such as racialized persons, persons with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQ2+ community.

Disclosure of the representation of equity-deserving groups on boards of directors and in senior leadership has become mandatory for TSX-listed companies and those covered by the Canadian Business Corporate Act (CBCA); however, reporting on 2SLGBTQIA+ representation is voluntary and not reported on publicly (Corporations Canada, 2019; TMX Group, 2022). NASDAQ-listed companies are now required to disclose the representation of women, men, non-binary, LGBTQ+, Indigenous, and visible minorities on boards of directors, and while this is helpful in creating quantitative evidence for measuring and assessing diversity at top levels, a 2021 study by the Conference Board of Canada found that disclosure itself has done little to accelerate representation (MacDougall, 2021).

At the time of this report, there are no consolidated statistics on the representation of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals at leadership levels in Canada; however, a review of leadership representation of public companies and boards of directors in Canada found that inclusion at these levels is extremely low (MacDougall et al., 2022). According to the Prosperity Project's annual report on Gender Diversity and Leadership, 2SLGBTQIA+ women hold less than 2% of senior leadership and pipeline positions in Canadian businesses. Of the surveyed Canadian companies,

only 34% report having at least one 2SLGBTQIA+ woman and only 9.2% report having at least one non-binary individual in their pipelines to senior management - with actual representation in senior and executive levels being much lower (The Prosperity Project, 2023).

With limited statistics and an abundance of community knowledge on underrepresentation and economic exclusion, this study aims to fill a gap in documented evidence with an assessment of qualitative accounts from queer and trans leaders, as well as a review of current policies and practices from employers in Canada.



# Methodology

In collaboration with our community and partners, Pride at Work Canada undertook a study on pathways to leadership for members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities in Canada. This study used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders and current employer practices in different industries to better understand what leadership pathways exist for 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals, what barriers and supports exist on these pathways, and what mechanisms are used to increase representation and inclusion at leadership levels.

The core research team was composed of white and racialized, trans, non-binary, and cisgender queer researchers, some of whom have disabilities. The research support team was composed of white and racialized, cisgender, transgender and non-binary, Anglophone and Francophone queer researchers, some of whom are disabled or neurodivergent.

Multiple stages of this research were done in partnership with community experts, including the design of the interview protocols and guiding questions, design of the recommendations, and finalization of the research report - namely JusticeTrans, Workforce Warriors, the Ontario Digital Literacy and Access Network, and the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business.

## Interviews

Interviews were conducted with two groups of informants, Leaders and Employers. A total of 23 2SLGBTQIA+ senior and executive Leaders and 13 Employers in the private, public, and non-profit sectors participated in the study. Leaders were identified through purposive sampling

by their public professional profiles and through professional networks, while Employers were identified through purposive sampling of Pride at Work Canada's Proud Partner and Community Partner networks. Leader interviews focused on personal experiences and career journeys while Employer interviews focused on workplace policies and practices.

Interviews were 75 minutes long and followed a set of guiding questions but were semi-structured in nature, meaning that the questions asked during interviews were often determined by the flow of the conversation. As such, while some questions were asked in every interview, others were only asked in some interviews and not all participants responded to every question. Therefore, throughout this report statistical data has been prepared to report on questions to which all participants explicitly responded (i.e., "48% of leaders engaged [in DEI work] both as part of their job descriptions and through additional volunteer work") and summary data has been prepared to report on questions to which not all participants responded (i.e., "Many leaders reported never having had a mentor who shared identity traits with them.").

## Surveys

Leader participants also took part in a survey to provide demographic data. The statistical analysis of demographic data might be greater than 100% as a result of inviting survey participants to self-describe and "select all that apply", providing an opportunity to identify multiple intersecting identities (e.g., someone who is multi-racial may chose to select Black and Indigenous as well as racialized). Demographic data was not collected for the Employer participants as these interviews

focused on workplace policies and practices rather than personal experiences.

## Participants

Employer participants represented public, private, and non-profit sectors and a range of industries, including government, manufacturing, real estate, health care, insurance, retail, construction, and non-profit. 2SLGBTQIA+ leader participants identified a range of gender identities, sexual orientations, ages, racial and ethnic identities, experiences of disability, and regions in Canada (See page 13 for full breakdown of demographic information for Leader Participants).

Throughout the report, identity factors are referred to in order to give context to the experiences participants shared in their interviews. As is mentioned in the glossary, this report avoids using “BIPOC” and instead refers to the individual identities of participants involved in the research, based on self-identification. This is in order to demonstrate the diversity of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and avoid the erasure of communities that are often marginalized or excluded.

## Over and underrepresentation

This study aimed to overrepresent groups in 2SLGBTQIA+ communities that are typically underrepresented in corporate leadership, particularly those who are trans, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled, and those with immigrant backgrounds (Ng & Rumens, 2017). This intersectionality is present in the study sample, as demonstrated throughout the report when the intersectional identities of participants are referred to; however, some groups were underrepresented or unrepresented in this study.

Black women, asexual individuals, and Black and Indigenous individuals overall were underrepresented in the study sample which limits the ability of this analysis to capture the experiences of individuals with these identities. Additionally, Indigenous women, Black trans and non-binary individuals, and intersex individuals were

not represented in the study sample which means that their experiences may not be reflected in this study.

The research team relates the underrepresentation of the groups mentioned above to a short timeframe for recruitment, limited time availability of individuals in leadership positions to participate, and the over-researching of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities (i.e., out queer and trans leaders receive numerous requests to participate in interviews for research, media, etc. which leaves them stretched thin to take part in such work). Additionally, the research team recognizes that many queer and trans leaders reach leadership positions by concealing their identities and may therefore not be interested in participating in a study like this in which they are asked to share private and potentially triggering information about their career experiences.

**NOTE:** One participant in this study identified as Indigenous to Northern Turtle Island, or Canada, and one identified as Mixtec/Mestizo, Indigenous to the area of Mexico. The demographic analysis in this study is based on individual self-identification and therefore the research team has preserved the identities of research participants as they were reported; however, we recognize that there may be differences in the lived experiences and cultures of Indigenous communities in different parts of the world.

# Participants

**30%** of participants identified as Two-Spirit, transgender, or non-binary, and **70%** identified as cisgender.

**55%** of participants identified as Black, Indigenous, or racialized. **14%** of participants identified as Black, **9%** identified as Indigenous, **32%** identified as racialized, and **45%** identified as white.

**48%** of participants were born outside of Canada.

Of those who disclosed, participants represented four provinces - including Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec - with **65%** from Ontario and **22%** from Quebec.

Participants represented numerous different industries - including law, finance and banking, consulting and business services, education, retail, tech, non-profit, and health.

Participants used multiple terms to describe their sexual orientation with many leaders using 2 to 3 terms, including Two-Spirit (**4%**), Lesbian (**26%**), Gay (**26%**), Bisexual (**13%**), Queer (**30%**), Asexual (**4%**), and Pansexual (**9%**).

**9%** of participants identified as trans and heterosexual, and **4%** as “attracted to women”.

**26%** of participants identified as having a disability. Among those who disclosed, 4 had an invisible or non-evident disability and 1 had both an invisible and visible disability.

**22%** of participants identified French as the primary language they speak at work and/or home, and **13%** of participants were interviewed in French.



# Study Results Pathways to Leadership

# Pathways to Leadership

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# Career Movement

## 01

2SLGBTQIA+ leaders in this study reported experiencing slower career progression than their straight and cisgender colleagues. Slowed career progression was often the result of having less access to career planning support, having to make lateral or backward career movements to leave unsafe work environments, experiencing a lack of employer support, and/or having access to fewer opportunities for advancement.

### Career planning

While career planning can be an important part of a successful and satisfying career, almost 60% of leaders in this study reported that they had not engaged in early career planning and that their career progression had not followed a defined plan. For the leaders in this study who did engage in career planning, this was often a result of having early-career access to a system of support. For example, a South Asian lesbian woman reported that joining a talent recruitment program after graduating university shaped her career path and helped her access a career support system. Additionally, a Latin American-Southeast Asian trans woman with an immigrant background reported that

her first company supported her through a structured training program that allowed her to plan and access a career path to leadership. She also reported feeling very lucky to receive this investment as an openly trans woman. For some, career planning was used as a survival mechanism to combat the discrimination they anticipated facing as a roadblock in their careers. For example, a Black bisexual man shared:

**“I knew that being Black in [my industry] is hard enough, so everything had to be planned. And what some people might call very ambitious, it’s funny with those microaggressions, they [say] that I’m being very aggressive in my career.”**

For the leaders in this study who did not engage in career planning, career movements were often based on decisions around safety instead of a career plan. Many who had disclosed or could not conceal their queer and/or trans identities shared



that the pathways they took to leadership had been disjointed and punctuated by discrimination. For example, a Black queer woman with an immigrant background stated that she had to move to where it was safe and find spaces that would accommodate her. This created extra work, made her feel precarious, and caused her to advance in her career more slowly. Additionally, a Two-Spirit non-binary Indigenous leader with a disability described their career journey as one of precarity as they had to make career movements to avoid violence and seek accommodating workplaces.

## Career progression

Unsafe working conditions not only create emotional hardships for queer and trans professionals, but many leaders in this study reported that lateral career moves necessitated by these conditions and the limited planning that is possible in these circumstances result in slowed career progression. Almost all leaders in this study reported slowed career progression due to discrimination and marginalization in the workplace. For example, a white asexual/bisexual trans woman with a disability described leaving a previous company after experiencing ongoing transphobia and stated that she would be in a higher position if she didn't have to move laterally to a new company. Additionally, a white non-binary neurodivergent leader shared:

**“Because I couldn't keep a job, right? When you look at my LinkedIn profile, it looks like I can't keep the job [but] they just can't keep me.”**

Discrimination and marginalization in the workplace slowed career progress even when queer and trans leaders did not leave their workplaces. For example, many Black, Indigenous, and racialized leaders in this study described how the combination of racism and homophobia make it harder for junior and aspiring leaders to gain credibility. A Mixtec/Mestizo descent gay man originally from outside of

Canada reported that people underestimated him and discouraged him from seeking leadership roles because he had an accent and that he often needed to conceal or downplay his sexual orientation in order to be perceived as a leader, which slowed his career progression. Additionally, a Middle Eastern gay man with an immigrant background shared how he experienced many microaggressions in early stages of his career that he did not realize were discriminatory; for example, colleagues suggesting he change his name because it was difficult for them to pronounce. This leader shared how he internalized this discrimination and believed that he was not fit for leadership as a result. This demonstrates the role of intersectionality in creating barriers and challenges along the career journeys of individuals with multiple marginalized identities as discrimination based on race, disability, and immigration status, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity, to negatively impact career progression towards leadership.

Most white and cisgender leaders in this study reported having earlier access to support for career planning and encountered fewer barriers to their career progression. For example, a white lesbian Francophone woman reported that sharing her identity allowed her to access advancement opportunities:

**“I've always been quite transparent about my sexual orientation and I think it's been favourable for me to share this ... I've never felt like I've had to hide it or that it's been a threat to the advancement of my career. But this might have been different if I was in a different industry.”**

Additionally, a white gay Francophone man shared that he is aware of his privilege as a cisgender, white, gay man and how this privilege has helped speed his career progression. He also shared how he uses this

privilege to raise awareness of 2SLGBTQIA+ issues in hostile environments.

## Advancement opportunities

Most trans, non-binary, and queer Black and Indigenous leaders in this study reported that they had to do more work to advance their careers and were not offered the same opportunities as their cisgender, heterosexual, and white peers. For example, two Black queer leaders shared that despite engaging strategically in education and development opportunities, they had to initiate every advancement conversation and build a business case for why they should be promoted. One of these leaders, a Black bisexual man, shared:

**“They’ve never been trained on how to develop someone like me to get [to leadership]. I say, well what’s my career path? Or, how do I develop? They put it back on me. But it shouldn’t be on me, if you have good succession planning you should know how to advance me.”**

Additionally, a white asexual/bisexual trans woman with a disability described being passed over for promotions:

**“I think [being trans] hurt my chances. There was one time in particular where I totally should have been promoted. I just rolled off an incredibly successful project, there were four project leaders and I was one of them. All of them got promotions. But they told me ‘No, we can’t give you the promotion.’”**

White lesbian and bisexual women in this study reported that they perceived more barriers related to their gender than their sexual orientation:

**“I’ve faced more clear barriers as a woman in this industry than being bisexual ... [though] I’m experiencing less microaggressions as I progress in my career ... I’ve adopted a more masculine style to get my voice heard.”**

— White bisexual woman

A white lesbian Francophone woman with an immigrant background shared that she has had to work twice as hard to be seen as credible, with some people believing she was only hired because she is a woman. Another white lesbian woman shared:

**“I’ve definitely benefited from the assumption of heterosexual privilege and working in a female dominated industry. I ended up having an easier time than some of my peers.”**

# Disclosure, Concealing, and Downplaying

## 02

A study by Telus found that 57% of LGBTQ employees in Canada have not disclosed their identity at work because of fear of repercussions and negative career impacts (Lee, 2016). This is further illustrated by the experiences of leaders in this study who shared many different motivations and concerns which factored into their decisions to disclose at work, and a variety of positive and negative repercussions that followed disclosure. Disclosure is not a one-time, said and done event. It is an ongoing relationship between identity and place that is influenced by both internal and external factors. Just as one's "place" changes throughout the day - moving from home to office to after-work social hour - so does one's relationship with disclosure. Therefore, decisions around disclosure in different professional spaces are different for every individual and may change over time.

### Decisions to disclose in the workplace

With only one exception, all leaders in this study have disclosed all or parts of their personal identities at work, including factors such as sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as ethnicity and disability. While

the decision to disclose was influenced by multiple factors, leaders in this study shared that throughout their careers, the decision to disclose, conceal, and/or downplay their identities at work was often based on safety concerns about violence and discrimination. Most leaders in this study described constantly assessing the safety of their internal teams, leadership teams, and external partners when deciding when, what, and how much to disclose about their personal identities

For those who chose to disclose or be open about their sexual orientations and/or gender identities at work, the decision was made at all different career stages. In making this decision, 44% of leaders were motivated by a desire or need to be their authentic selves at work (see figure on page 22). Leaders reported desiring an easing of the mental burden required for concealment, a freedom to speak openly about their families and partners, and an ability to access supports and benefits in the workplace (i.e., participating in ERG and community events, accessing gender affirming health care, etc.) This desire or need to be their authentic selves at work factored in some way into the decision to disclose for every leader in this study. 26% reported disclosing based on a sense of safety or security in their

workplace - safety and security from discrimination, job loss, and other possible repercussions. This feeling of safety and security was perceived based on receiving executive sponsorship, seeing vocal and visible allyship amongst leadership, seeing visible 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in leadership, and reaching higher levels of seniority. Most leaders in this study reported that they continue to disclose and share their stories at work in order to act as role models and empower others to be their authentic selves.

Having reached higher seniority levels in their careers at the time of this study, most leaders reported having disclosed all aspects of their identities in the workplace (including sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, etc.). The motivations for disclosing all rather than just some identity factors ranged widely from building a personal brand as an authentic leader to disclosing as a safety and survival mechanism in order to secure necessary supports and accommodations. 12% of leaders reported feeling that disclosure was essentially a part of their DEI or ERG leadership roles and that being open enhanced their credibility as leaders and experts in their fields - though not everyone in a DEI or ERG role shared this feeling.

Some leaders reported having only disclosed parts of their identities and many reported waiting until they reached senior positions to disclose certain parts of their identities - for example, choosing to disclose gender identity but not sexual orientation. Leaders in this study with multiple marginalized identities - including those who are trans, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled - shared that since they cannot conceal the visible aspects of their identities, they often choose not to disclose the invisible aspects. For example, a Black bisexual man shared that he avoided disclosing his sexual orientation for many years because of the barriers he already faced as a Black man in the corporate world. This leader also shared that facing racism in queer community spaces and homophobia in Black community spaces causes him to conceal different parts of his identity depending on the space he is in. Similarly, a white asexual/bisexual trans woman with

a disability reported that since she could not conceal her gender identity, she often chose to conceal or downplay her sexual orientation and disability to avoid compounding discrimination.

## Experiences with disclosure in the workplace

Positive experiences with disclosure included an easing of mental burden, becoming a stronger leader, and contributing to more inclusive workplaces. For example, a Black bisexual man shared that finally being able to disclose his sexual orientation reduced a heavy mental burden and allowed him to become a better leader since he could support others to be their authentic selves at work. Similarly, an East Asian lesbian woman with an immigrant background shared how she felt a greater sense of safety at work after being able to disclose her identity.

Leaders in this study also described negative experiences with disclosure, including being tokenized, being sexually harassed, experiencing discrimination and violence, having limitations placed on their careers, being discredited, and being fired because of their identities. For example, a white asexual/bisexual trans woman with a disability reported being told by leadership that she would be unable to advance at her company if she transitioned. Additionally, a South Asian lesbian woman shared that she experiences marginalization and bias due to her ethnicity and sexual orientation:

**“Your expertise is maybe questioned a little bit more, it sometimes takes a lot longer and more of a track record to kind of establish yourself.”**

## Concealing and downplaying in the workplace

Whether they had disclosed all or only parts of their identities at work, leaders in this study shared how homophobia, transphobia, racism, and ableism led them to downplay certain aspects of themselves at work at different times - such as their need for accommodations, their appearance and mannerisms, and their ability to share about their families and partners and their interests and hobbies. For example, a Black bisexual man reported having to code-switch at work in order to seem relatable to a white cisgender heterosexual leadership team. He also shared that code-switching and concealing his sexual orientation is what allowed him to advance in his career. Additionally, a Black queer woman with an immigrant background shared that she has been forced to code-switch in unsafe professional settings, and that code-switching can cause significant harm:

**“What code-switching does is minimize who you are. It’s almost like you’re just taking pieces of you and throwing them away.”**

### **COMMUNITY INSIGHT: AVOIDING TOKENIZATION**

Leaders in this study had different feelings about the relevance of their personal identities to their professional selves. While some felt that their sexual orientation, gender identity, or ethnicity was inextricably linked to who they are as professionals and leaders, others did not want to have their personal identities constantly highlighted in relation to their professional work.

Whether or not an individual chooses to disclose their identities at work, it’s important that that individual is able to maintain ownership of their identities in the workplace. 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals may or may not want to define themselves by these personal identity factors. Therefore, employers and colleagues should not take these identity factors out of context in order to define who someone else is as a professional; instead, they should allow that individual to define themselves in whichever way is true and authentic to them.

What motivated your decision to disclose your identities in the workplace when you did?

44%

Desire / Need to be Authentic Self  
\*Factored into everyone's decision in some way

26%

Sense of Safety / Security

12%

Nature of DEI / ERG Role

9%

Can't Conceal

9%

Outed by Other

# 2SLGBTQIA+ Talent Retention

## 03

Effective talent retention strategies can reduce employee turnover, improve engagement, and strengthen leadership pipelines, making it a business imperative for employers in every sector and industry (Breitling et al., 2021). Most private and public sector employers in this study shared that talent retention is also a major part of the business case for diversity, equity, and inclusion work in their organizations. Despite this, no private or public sector employer in this study reported having a retention strategy for 2SLGBTQIA+ talent, while many non-profit employers did.

When discussing career movement, aspirations, and satisfaction, queer and trans leaders in this study described what caused them to leave and/or avoid particular jobs and employers. Leaders identified four areas that contributed to 2SLGBTQIA+ turnover and where retention interventions could be focused by employers to keep 2SLGBTQIA+ talent at their organizations, including: experiencing discrimination from leadership and in “inclusive” spaces; a lack of relevant benefits; a lack of employer investment; and limited or non-existent pathways forward.

### Discrimination from leadership and in “inclusive” spaces

Many leaders in this study reported leaving organizations when they experienced discrimination from leadership, including direct supervisors and executive leadership. Contrastingly, leaders were more likely to stay at an organization where members of the leadership team acted as allies or provided direct support (e.g., executive sponsorship, championing inclusive organizational policy, etc.)

Discrimination from leadership was a common experience during early and mid-career stages and less common at upper levels. And while many leaders reported experiencing discrimination from leadership, it was more common for trans, non-binary, racialized, and Black leaders who experienced transphobia, homophobia, and racism in both blatant forms and in the form of microaggressions. For example, a South Asian gay man with a disability and an immigrant background shared:



**“The executive assistant to the CEO said to me, ‘he doesn’t like you because you’re gay’ and [another colleague] actually said ‘you know, you need to tone yourself down a bit. You’re very enthusiastic and all of that, but sometimes leadership can’t take you seriously.’”**

Though discrimination from leadership was less common among white and cisgender leaders, a white lesbian Francophone woman with an immigrant background shared that even at an organization where she felt supported, she still faced discrimination from leadership:

**“When I announced that I was pregnant, [the founder] said ‘oh no, not you! I have a lesbian in the company, did she really have to get pregnant?’”**

Leaders in this study also reported how experiencing discrimination in spaces that are meant to be inclusive (e.g., employee resource groups (ERGs) and affinity groups) can cause disengagement and prevent them from accessing benefits that are important for retention. Most leaders in this study are involved in their workplace’s ERGs and shared how ERGs can enhance feelings of inclusion, especially in early stages of career, by cultivating community and providing access to networking, mentoring, and development opportunities. However, leaders in this study also reported that these spaces can become harmful when racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism occur - especially for leaders who are trans, non-binary, and have multiple marginalized identities. For example, a white trans man shared how he experienced transphobia in his company’s Pride ERG when cisgender members asked him inappropriate questions about his gender and sexual orientation.

Additionally, a Mixtec/Mestizo descent gay man originally from outside of Canada shared:

**“Of course many [Indigenous] Nations are very open, they are very welcome but it is not the case for all the communities ... Not all are welcome to LGBTQ identities, right? So sometimes you need to be careful. I have the privilege that I’m a cis[gender] man so I can hide my [identity] when I’m not feeling safe in a space.”**

Black queer leaders in this study also reported experiencing and/or witnessing homophobia in Black professional groups, and racism in queer professional groups. Employees who experience discrimination in spaces that are meant to be inclusive are not safe to be their authentic selves and may be forced to downplay their identities or to avoid these spaces. This limits their access to intended benefits, community, and support, and thereby diminishes the potential of ERGs, affinity groups, and other professional groups to contribute to retention.

## **Lack of relevant benefits and accommodations**

Queer and trans leaders in this study reported that the absence of relevant benefits and accommodation policies and practices (i.e., inclusive of families and partners, healthcare needs, cultural needs, and disability needs) caused them to leave or avoid certain employers, whereas leaders were more likely to stay with and seek out employers who offered relevant benefits and accommodations.

In cases where relevant health benefits were not offered - for example, because the benefits package relied on narrow definitions of “family,” “parent,” or “partner” or because specific health needs



were missing or not adequately covered (i.e., gender transition and affirmation care, HIV-related medication) - leaders in this study reported feeling like they did not have a future with their company and therefore sought employment elsewhere. For example, an East Asian lesbian woman with an immigrant background reported:

**“It was difficult for me to picture myself working there for the long term [because] all the benefits were designed for straight couple goals ... As a lesbian, those policies didn’t fit for me. So I really didn’t think that was a great place to work for me, even though I enjoyed the work and the teams.”**

Similarly, a white trans man reported only beginning to see a future with his company when his company accepted and implemented his proposal for trans health benefits:

**“It’s really hard to show up at work when you don’t feel good about who you are in the workplace. It’s just been that one sponsor that helped me get the trans benefits over the line and who really went the extra mile to understand and to support me.”**

Many leaders in this study also shared how a lack of accessibility and accommodations in the workplace led to poor employee experience and turnover, particularly for queer and trans leaders with multiple marginalized identities. For example, a Two-Spirit non-binary Indigenous leader with a disability shared that in their workplace, they have to re-submit accommodation requests for every meeting,

which wastes time and makes meetings inaccessible. This leader also shared:

**“When we were moving back to in-person, I had to go through [human resources] for accommodations and they refused me to stay remote. It was the [executive director] that agreed that I could still stay remote [because] our household is immunocompromised.”**

This leader reported leaving previous workplaces due to a lack of disability accommodations, gender neutral washroom facilities, and dedicated space to meet with an Indigenous Elder.

A lack of flexibility, accommodations, and recognition also affected queer and trans leaders whose workplaces were not understanding of their caregiving duties when they fell outside of cis-hetero family norms. For example, a Black queer woman with an immigrant background did not feel supported by her workplace when she adopted her child:

**“Normally there’s some acknowledgement [when someone has a baby], but people didn’t quite know what to do with this one. It’s like ‘adoption ... oh no, we’re gonna have to talk about the other partner.’ The awkwardness of the whole thing. I’m like, work it out, you got to do something for me, you did it for everyone else [that had a baby]!”**

## Lack of investment from employer

Leaders in this study reported feeling disengaged and leaving employers who did not invest in their professional development; a large piece of this included skills and leadership development as well as supportive guidance, mentorship, and sponsorship. Black, Indigenous, trans, and non-binary leaders in this study were less likely to receive this kind of investment from their employers. For example, a Black bisexual man shared that although he had access to a professional development fund, he never received any guidance from supervisors, leaders, or potential mentors on which opportunities he should pursue to reach his career goals. Additionally, a Two-Spirit non-binary Indigenous leader with a disability shared:

**“I often saw other folks getting supported and mentored [but] I never got that same mentoring or support along my way.”**

In other cases, leaders reported that when their supervisors put them forward for development opportunities that were not inclusive or relevant to their identities, the negative experience outweighed any potential benefit. For example, a white non-binary neurodivergent leader reported that their company put them into a program for high performing women, which did not align with their gender identity:

**“[I said] ‘But I don’t identify this way and so I think we should open this space up for someone who does.’ And I was told, respectfully you know, to demonstrate my enthusiasm and to play into this program ... And the external facilitator couldn’t get their head wrapped around it,**

**[she] kept referring to all of us as ‘ladies’ and [she said] ‘what am I supposed to call you, it?’”**

Similarly, a Two-Spirit non-binary Indigenous leader with a disability shared that they were put forward for a leadership training hosted by an organization they had previously been harmed by:

**“I went to get the certificate, but the trainer was not equipped to train me. They didn’t talk about leadership in a way that was relevant to me.”**

This leader reported instead turning to their community to develop skills related to Indigenous leadership. These experiences undermine retention and leader development efforts, and ultimately contribute to poor employee experiences and turnover of 2SLGBTQIA+ talent.

## Limited representation and pathways forward

Leaders in this study reported feeling frustrated and disengaged in workplaces where they saw no pathway forward, communicated by a lack of sponsorship, employer-initiated career conversations, and visible representation at leadership levels. For example, an East Asian lesbian woman with an immigrant background shared that a lack of visible diversity at mid and upper levels communicated to her that she would have fewer opportunities to move up:

**“I felt that there might be less opportunity for me in [that] team ... there was not much chance for me to advance.”**

This leader reported feeling more confident in her future prospects after intentionally moving to a team with more visible diversity. Similarly, a Black gay

man with an immigrant background reported that while his employer has invested in his development and he has felt valued, he has not had the same progression or pathway forward as his white, heterosexual peers:

**“At every junction from when I started moving up the ladder, I had to have tough conversations with the organization on the speed of movement. I had to do the initiation. So, I got to the right place, but I had to do more to get there.”**

Leaders in this study also shared how a lack of diversity in leadership levels resulted in more barriers and further obscured pathways to leadership, which resulted in disengagement and turnover. For example, a Black bisexual man shared:

**“Some people [in leadership] get fearful they might not know how to talk to me because I don’t fit [the norm] - I don’t have a cottage, I don’t go skiing, I don’t listen to the music they do. It’s hard sometimes for them to relate to me and so it’s harder for me to get promoted and rise in the ranks.”**

This leader shared how the inability of an all-white and heterosexual leadership team to relate with him as a person made them less likely to view him as fit for leadership or take interest in his advancement. Additionally, a South Asian gay man shared that while he has been able to see a pathway forward to leadership, this is because of the sponsors and mentors he has been able to lean on, and this pathway does not exist for everyone in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community:

**“I would say of the LGBT community in [this industry], I’m one of the few that have made it into [the top level], and you sort of see your peers that are LGBT dropping like flies. A lot of it is because they don’t have those sponsors or mentors or others that help them navigate.”**

# Mentorship, Sponsorship, Networking, and Support Systems

## 04

Mentorship, sponsorship, and networks are extremely important for both career and personal development (Ang, 2018; Randel et al., 2021). Leaders in this study all discussed the importance of meaningful mentorship, sponsorship, networks, and other support systems to both professional and personal development which have significant impact on career growth. However, while many leaders in this study reported benefiting directly from one or more of these supports, trans, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled leaders reported having less access to mentors and sponsors than white leaders, cisgender leaders, and leaders without disabilities.

### Mentorship

While some leaders reported never having had a professional mentor, many leaders reported having multiple mentoring relationships throughout their careers. Leaders who had mentors described these relationships as sources of inspiration, encouragement, and guidance that enabled them to take on new roles and advance their careers. Additionally, most leaders who had mentors reported that their mentoring

relationships were developed through informal connections rather than formal mentorship programs. Relationships formed organically through professional, volunteer, and personal connections tended to be more impactful than those that were made in formalized programs; however, some leaders reported how having formalized mentorship programs earlier in their careers helped them access career planning and build a professional network, and ultimately demonstrated investment from their employer.

Most leaders reported never having had a mentor who shared identity traits with them. While some felt that having shared identities was not important and that they have been adequately supported by mentors who identified as allies to the queer and trans community, many expressed a strong desire to have this type of mentorship. Leaders who did have the support of a mentor with shared identities reported benefitting from guidance on specific and unique challenges in their careers that others without this lived experience would not have been able to offer. For example, a Black gay man with an immigrant background shared how he benefited significantly from having a gay mentor at his company:

**“[It was important] knowing I had a personal guide and a friend and a mentor and we can share certain things that no one else could share.”**

Trans and non-binary leaders and leaders who are queer and Black, Indigenous, racialized, or disabled had more difficulty finding mentors who shared identity traits with them, despite intentionally seeking out this type of support. Leaders reported facing barriers when trying to access this kind of mentorship, including transphobia and racism within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and a lack of senior and executive professionals with these identities who can act as mentors. For example, a Latin American trans woman with a disability and an immigrant background described the difficulty of trying to find a mentor with multiple marginalized identities:

**“I’m still trying to find mentors that have intersectional identities like I do. And it’s hard to find because they’re stretched thin, like they’re racialized and have a life and they themselves don’t have the support that they need.”**

And a Black queer woman with an immigrant background shared that her mentors advised her to conceal her queer identity:

**“I had people who were older than me in my field saying ‘It’s not safe, just keep quiet, you won’t be able to move up the ranks. It’s better to keep it to yourself.’”**

## Sponsorship

Whereas a mentor is someone who provides career advice and guidance, a sponsor actively uses their

professional reputation to advance their protégé’s career by increasing their visibility, recommending them for promotions and raises, and providing them with other advancement opportunities. Sponsors helped some leaders in this study move into senior, executive, and other leadership positions. Additionally, executive sponsorship helped some leaders feel more comfortable disclosing their sexual orientations and/or gender identities at work and reduced feelings of tokenization.

Many leaders in this study reported not having a sponsor and some were not sure of how or when sponsorship should fit into their career journeys. Most leaders who did not currently have or plan to have a sponsor also reported not having access to a mentor and not receiving support for career planning. An East Asian lesbian woman with an immigrant background reported that her career would have been very different if she had had a sponsor:

**“There are no regrets now, but I think knowledge is power and having someone to push you a bit more, it would have helped in my professional life, I would have been here sooner. [But] there was never that guidance.”**

Additionally, some leaders reported being assigned sponsors in their workplaces and being expected to teach the assigned sponsor about the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. For example, a white non-binary neurodivergent leader shared:

**“They gave me a sponsor who, who they [wanted] me to coach because he could not get his head wrapped around LGBTQ.”**

Additionally, a Black gay man with an immigrant background shared:

**“A lot of executives actually used to reach out to me because**



they want to learn something [about] 2SLGBTQ+ and in return, because of [their] status, they know that I will benefit from them also.”

While one leader noted that this benefited their careers and they accepted it as a mutually beneficial exchange, another reported experiencing harmful behaviours and attitudes from their assigned sponsors.

## Networking

This study found that 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals often experience harm and microaggressions in professional networking spaces which can limit their opportunities for forming network connections, cause them to conceal parts of their identities and code-switch in order to feel safe, or avoid professional networking spaces altogether. Leaders in this study reported having less access to inclusive networking spaces where they felt comfortable and safe to be themselves, and where they did not feel tokenized by others. Trans, non-binary, and Black queer leaders in this study were less likely to have access to networking spaces, with many noting that safe networking spaces do not exist for them and that they are often the only ones like themselves in such spaces. For example, a white trans man shared that inclusive networking spaces are not available for trans people:

**“I don’t think there’s any professional work setting where I truly feel comfortable being out as a trans person.”**

Additionally, Black queer leaders in this study reported having to conceal or downplay their sexual orientation in Black professional networking spaces due to homophobia. For example, a Black gay man with an immigrant background shared that when he started working on 2SLGBTQIA+ issues in his workplace, it affected how he was treated in Black community spaces:

**“I would hear snickering. They would not want to have an association with me because they thought people will think that they’re also gay.”**

## Support Systems

With or without mentorship, sponsorship, or professional networking, queer and trans leaders in this study reported building their own support systems to help them advance in their careers. Many leaders highlighted the support they received from being in community with other 2SLGBTQIA+ people. For example, a Mixtec/Mestizo descent gay man originally from outside of Canada shared that he is part of an industry leader network in which he can share his experiences and develop relationships, and a Two-Spirit non-binary Indigenous leader with a disability shared that they turned to their Indigenous community and queer communities of colour for support with their professional development and career movement. However, some noted that in their personal and community networks, it was difficult to find career-specific support and guidance for work in the corporate sector.

**COMMUNITY INSIGHT:** Almost all leaders in this study, whether or not they had received mentorship or sponsorship in their own careers, reported serving as a mentor and/or sponsor now. Leaders reported offering the support that they wish they had access to earlier in their careers and intentionally mentoring and sponsoring aspiring leaders from marginalized communities. As mentors and sponsors, leaders in this study described connecting aspiring leaders with resources, helping them navigate discrimination and microaggressions, and supporting their development as leaders.

# What would it have meant to have a mentor who shared identity traits with you?

“I would have felt cared about, heard, and believed in. I would have developed trust in myself earlier, I would have had a higher level of confidence.”

— White non-binary neurodivergent leader

“It would have meant a lot. I would have been able to advocate for myself a lot more if I had somebody encouraging me to. I was afraid of being an issue, [so] I was making myself small ... I think it would have helped me use my voice more.”

— White trans man

“I [would have] liked a mentor to show me how to be a transgender leader with a disability. [It] could have helped in my career development, having somebody in a senior [role], somebody queer, somebody with a disability to help me navigate those spaces and challenges.”

— Latin American trans woman with a disability and an immigrant background

Based on a review of employer practices and the career experiences of queer and trans leaders, 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in leadership may be limited by a misalignment of practices for increasing representation. This study found differences between what practices were identified as effective by leaders and what practices are used by employers to advance 2SLGBTQIA+ leadership:

Top answers by 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders in this study:

## What inclusive practices contributed to your career & what can companies do to increase queer and trans representation in leadership?

# 01

Executive mentorship and sponsorship for 2SLGBTQIA+ employees.

# 02

Targeted talent development strategy and targeted hiring/ promoting.

# 03

Leadership more active as allies - “accomplices” who share the work.

Top answers by private and public sector employers in this study:

## What policies and practices does your company use to increase 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in leadership?

# 01

Trainings and educational campaigns (non-synchronous and scheduled events).

# 02

Diversity census and Self-ID forms to create statistics on representation.

# 03

Anti-bias practices in hiring (training, diverse panels, etc.)



# Talent Development and Advancement

## 05

When asked about the inclusive that practices contributed to their careers and what employers can do to increase 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in leadership, leaders in this study identified three common strategies: offering executive sponsorship and mentorship, having targeted talent development and hiring/promotion strategies, and promoting active allyship at the leadership level. Contrastingly, when asked what policies and practices are used to increase 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in leadership, employers in this study identified three different strategies: training and educational campaigns, demographic data collection (diversity census and self-ID forms), and anti-bias practices in hiring (see figure on page 32). While these employer practices are recognized as promising practices in diversity, equity, and inclusion work more generally, there is a clear misalignment with what practices have helped 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals reach their leadership positions in reality.

Despite being the most common practice identified by leaders in this study to increase 2SLGBTQIA+ representation, no private or public sector

employer in this study reported having a practice for executive mentorship or sponsorship targeted to 2SLGBTQIA+ talent, although some reported offering mentorship and/or sponsorship programs for equity-deserving groups more broadly. Additionally, no private or public sector employer in this study reported using succession planning or a targeted talent development strategy to develop and advance 2SLGBTQIA+ talent, although some non-profit employers did have this practice in place and some private and public sector employers reported using succession planning to advance equity-deserving groups more broadly. While most private and public sector employers in this study reported that company leaders identify as allies, usually by sponsoring employee resource groups and Pride events, only two reported including allyship and DEI metrics in the performance plans of senior and/or executive leadership.

While routine demographic data collection is widely practiced among employers in this study, often through a voluntary diversity census or self-identification survey, this data is not used to its full potential for advancing queer and trans leadership.

According to employers and 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders with HR, DEI, and ERG roles, demographic data is typically only used to create representation statistics at different levels of the organization. While this practice can help identify gaps and progress on representation at different levels, no employer in this study reported using demographic data to assess career movement or outcomes for 2SLGBTQIA+ employees; although two employers reported having a plan to develop this practice in the future.

While inclusivity training and educational campaigns are important for promoting understanding and visibility, leaders in this study identified that these do not greatly contribute to increased 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in leadership. Two leaders in this study shared that there is a need for training efforts to move beyond basics and focus on deeper content, such as having difficult conversations, working with diverse teams, and integrating inclusivity into leadership competencies. As demonstrated above, leaders shared that the greatest impact comes from strategic talent development and advancement efforts to create more diverse leadership pipelines.

## DEI work as professional development

Leaders in this study shared how engaging in volunteer diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work contributed to professional development by creating opportunities to grow leadership skills and experience in inclusive environments, as well as by providing access to networking and relationship-building opportunities.

All leaders in this study reported being involved in DEI in a volunteer capacity in the workplace or wider community, with 48% of leaders engaging both as part of their job descriptions as well as through additional volunteer work. Leaders identified building essential leadership skills through this volunteer work including: the ability to work with diverse teams and cultivate inclusion, project management, relationship-building, self-confidence, and communication. These skills

contribute to effective leadership, sound decision-making, the ability to build trust, and the ability to motivate and inspire team members toward a common vision.

Volunteering also contributed significantly to job satisfaction and engagement among leaders in this study at both early and later stages of their careers - especially when recognized positively by colleagues and supervisors. 50% of leaders in this study reported that their volunteer DEI work had been recognized by their employers as a professional development activity and in some cases had contributed to career advancement opportunities.

However, despite this positive trend, some leaders shared that their volunteer DEI work is not seen as professional development and that it sometimes carried a career cost - particularly for trans, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, and racialized leaders who reported being fired for advocating for their needs in the workplace. Some leaders reported costs to career progression:

**“I almost see it as a bit of a kiss of death ... younger members of the [2SLGBTQIA+] community will join the diversity groups and [put] hundreds of hours into these efforts and not into billing or meeting with clients to grow their portfolios, and their cisgender Caucasian peers are the ones getting recognized [for their advanced portfolios].”**

— South Asian gay man

Additionally, a South Asian lesbian woman shared that mentors advised her to remove the 2SLGBTQIA+ volunteer work from her resume:

**“Mentors would very plainly say that it [was] the reason [I] wasn't getting hired.”**

Additionally, while this work contributes to job satisfaction, many leaders in this study shared that it also causes mental exhaustion and burnout, especially when the work is not positively recognized, does not contribute to career advancement, or is not compensated. Employers also recognized this:

**“If you’re really good at your work and you fit within an equity group, you’re gonna have a lot more to do than just your work. You’ve got to work and represent your equity group. Through an intersectional lens, I’m speaking for the 2SLGBT group, I’m speaking for the queer people, but I’m also speaking for the queer racialized people and the queer people with disabilities and Indigenous folks.”**

— Public sector employer

# Upper-Level Recruitment

## 06

Similar to the misalignment between strategies for 2SLGBTQIA+ talent development and advancement, this study found a misalignment between the realities of upper-level recruitment and the strategies used to reach and recruit 2SLGBTQIA+ talent.

Very few leaders in this study reported entering their current leadership positions through open competition or external job postings - though this is more common at earlier career levels. Most leaders reported entering their current leadership positions through internal advancement and/or with the support of a connection in their network. All leaders noted the importance of their professional networks in reaching the leadership level, as well as having institutional support and investment for leader development. This aligns with what employers shared when asked how recruitment to senior and executive levels typically happens.

Private, public, and non-profit sector employers in this study all shared that upper-level recruitment typically happens differently than entry and mid-level recruitment. Employers shared that while upper-level positions are sometimes posted for open and external competition, the positions are typically filled through

other means, such as through succession planning, relationships and referrals, executive recruitment agencies, and acting positions and appointments. However, when asked what practices are used to increase 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in senior and executive levels, employers in this study reported using inclusive job boards, hiring targets, diverse hiring panels, and anti-bias training. These strategies are not responsive to the barriers and supports identified by queer and trans leaders in this study, and are not reflective of the realities of upper-level recruitment as reported by employers.

### Succession planning

Employers shared that succession planning is a common tool for developing talent and filling upper-level positions, and many leaders in this study identified that, as leaders, they see succession planning as a viable tool for strategically advancing high-performing 2SLGBTQIA+ talent. However, no private or public sector employer in this study reported using succession planning in this way - although one employer in this group reported using this tool to advance

equity-deserving groups more broadly and others reported having a plan to develop a practice like this in the future. Additionally, some non-profit employers did report using succession planning to advance 2SLGBTQIA+ talent.

## Relationships and referrals

Employers in this study shared that upper-level recruitment often happens through relationships and referrals; however, no employer in this study reported offering executive mentorship or sponsorship opportunities for 2SLGBTQIA+ employees nor a mechanism for current leadership to grow their networks in 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. This demonstrates a significant gap in employer efforts to increase representation as 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals - especially those who are trans, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, racialized, or have an immigrant background - have less access to career supports that allow them to build these relationships, as has been previously discussed in this report.

## Executive recruitment agencies

Most employers in this study reported using executive recruitment agencies to fill upper-level vacancies; however, only one private sector employer and four non-profit employers reported working with agencies that specialize in recruiting 2SLGBTQIA+ talent specifically. Additionally, some private and public sector employers reported that they have no control and/or knowledge of the DEI practices of these external agencies.

## Acting positions and appointments

Some employers shared that acting positions and appointments are used to strategically move high performing talent into leadership positions, sometimes to allow the employee to develop in the role before

being offered the position and sometimes to fast-track an employee to leadership. However, only non-profit employers in this study reported using this as a tool to advance 2SLGBTQIA+ talent to leadership. Additionally, queer and trans leaders in this study who work in the private or public sector reported having less access to these opportunities:

**“I’ve been told you have to do the job before you get the job, or to wait until something’s available”**

— Black bisexual man

These findings suggest that there is a misalignment between efforts to diversify leadership levels and the actual means by which upper-level recruitment happens. This misalignment likely explains why employers across industries and sectors are still struggling to increase 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in upper levels and why 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders are still facing barriers to reaching these levels, as was reported by employers and 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders in this study. For example, many employers shared that diversity is much greater at entry and mid-levels of the organization, that most DEI work is focused on entry and mid-levels, and that pathways to leadership are narrower for employees from equity-deserving groups:

**“There are gaps [at the] senior management and executive level. That’s where all of our diversity, for lack of a better word, disappears”**

— Private sector employer

Another private sector employer shared that 2SLGBTQIA+ representation is extremely low at the leadership level and raised concerns about other equity-deserving groups as well:

**“If we have 70% of [employees] that are racialized... and we promote**

from within [most] of the time, well does that mean we're only promoting white people? Why am I not seeing that in leadership?"

— Private sector employer

Buy-in from current leadership may also hinder efforts to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion practically into upper-level recruitment. For example, when asked to describe diversity at leadership levels of their organizations, all private and public sector employers in this study described it as "poor" or "not diverse" with many reporting that DEI in leadership focuses mostly on women and racialized individuals, and that leadership is less comfortable discussing the representation of 2SLGBTQIA+ people:

**"When you start to get away from [women's representation], and start laying down specific goals for [2SLGBTQIA+ representation]. People get really uncomfortable. Very, very uncomfortable with that."**

— Private sector employer

Some employers reported that 2SLGBTQIA+ representation is improving and in each of these cases they reported having an active executive sponsor for this work.

# Inclusion at the Top

# 07

Consistent with findings from Osler (MacDougall et al. 2022) and The Prosperity Project (2023), this study found that 2SLGBTQIA+ communities are underrepresented in senior and executive leadership across the private and public sectors in Canada. Employers in this study all reported that diversity is poor at the upper levels of their organizations and some employers reported that 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion is not prioritized in conversations around diversity.

The barrierred or non-existent pathways to leadership for 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals means there are few opportunities for queer and trans individuals to reach leadership levels, but also that they are often alone when they do reach leadership. Almost all leaders in this study reported being the only openly queer and/or trans employee in leadership at their workplace. Additionally, queer and trans leaders in this study who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, or disabled were more likely to report being the only leader at their workplace with these intersecting identities.

## Comfort in leadership positions

When asked whether they feel comfortable in their leadership roles, 87% of leaders in this study answered

“Yes,” only 9% answered “No,” and 4% answered “Sometimes.” Those who do not feel comfortable or only sometimes feel comfortable in their leadership roles reported that although they are confident in their leadership abilities and job performance, their workplaces do not make them feel welcome or included at the leadership level. This feeling resulted from experiencing discrimination and microaggressions, a lack of employer investment, and questioning of decisions and authority.

For those who reported feeling comfortable in their leadership roles, the most common contributing factors were: active support from other leaders and their workplace overall; formal recognition of their leadership or expertise; and open conversations about race, gender, and sexual orientation in the workplace. Most leaders reported that their comfort and confidence grew over time and was backed by years of experience; however, over this time leaders also reported overcoming numerous challenges they faced in their leadership roles. Trans, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled leaders were more likely to report these challenges, as well as gay/bisexual men who did not fit typical masculine gender norms.



# Challenges to Queer and Trans Inclusion at the Top

## Transphobia, misogyny, and devaluing of feminine gender norms

Trans leaders, non-binary leaders, and gay/bisexual men in this study reported that their gender identities and/or gender expressions were used to devalue their leadership which created additional barriers to being seen as a leader, sometimes intersecting with race to further devalue their leadership.

**“People sometimes come across as surprised, which isn’t necessarily a bad reaction, but it’s not a nice feeling ... Even if it’s positive, it’s not equitable. Sometimes being transgender ... people are a little hesitant to take you [as a leader].”**

— White asexual/bisexual trans woman with a disability

**“It’s a mixture of race and misogynistic ideas of femininity, that I’m too effeminate and as a result, I don’t deserve the authority or my opinion doesn’t deserve the authority. It’s more [about] that than my sexuality.”**

— South Asian gay man with a disability and an immigrant background



# Racism and colonialism

Queer and trans leaders in this study who are Black, Indigenous, and racialized reported how racism, colonialism<sup>2</sup>, homophobia, and transphobia cause their leadership to be discounted or to be valued in spite of their identities.

**“My leadership style is ‘all of us or none of us’, consensus based, and acknowledging of how people are able to bring themselves into this space which is counterintuitive to the institution [I work in]. It’s not [seen as] an effective use of time nor valued by the institution that everyone’s included ... So no, I don’t feel comfortable in my position because it’s wanting me to perform indigeneity and not actually be Indigenous.”**

— Two-Spirit Indigenous non-binary leader with a disability

**“We have a network so all [industry organizations] in the province work together and the leaders in those spaces meet regularly. And I was Black, I was young, and I was queer. So no allies for any of those identities in that space ... Even now, [my identity] gets ignored. What people will do is say ‘in spite of that part of her identity, she’s a good leader.’”**

— Black queer woman with an immigrant background

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<sup>2</sup> Jimmy et al. 2019

Colonialism has led many Indigenous people to think negatively about queer and gender-diverse people in their communities. Christian European colonizers condemned same-sex relationships and gender variance as sinful and used these beliefs to further dehumanize Indigenous people. This has resulted in both marginalization on the basis of racial/ethnic identity and also of gender and sexuality.

# Ableism

The compounding effects of ableism, homophobia, and transphobia for queer and trans leaders who are disabled can be especially challenging when their disabilities are visible and subject to stereotypes and stigmas which can lead to additional barriers in being seen as a competent and capable leader. Additionally, leaders with invisible disabilities reported avoiding disclosing their disabilities to colleagues and employers due to fears of stigma, discrimination, or being seen as incapable - sometimes in relation to compound discrimination based on their multiple intersecting identities.

**“I often like to share my lived experiences and to share my experience with disability. But not in my schooling. Disclosing my disability in grad school might discredit me around other students.”**

— Latin American trans woman with a disability and an immigrant background

**“As a trans person, and being non-binary, specifically, and using gender neutral pronouns ... There’s no way to conceal that. Concealing is more related to disability, often not disclosing unless it’s necessary because of the way I think it’ll be seen, in many ways, as something that will hinder me or as a weakness ... I worry if I say I’m disabled, there are so many assumptions.”**

— White non-binary leader with a disability

# 2SLGBTQIA+ Leadership

## 08

Despite experiences of marginalization, all leaders in this study described how their lived experience as someone who is 2SLGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and/or disabled allowed them to develop skills, knowledge, and understanding that contributed positively to their leadership styles and abilities. Leaders in this study reported developing empathy and emotional intelligence, self-awareness, adaptability, inclusiveness, resourcefulness, and more. These skills contributed to leadership styles centred on relationship-building, trust, collaboration, community, and empowerment. Almost all leaders in this study reported that their identities and lived experiences made them better leaders in this way.

For example, a South Asian gay man with a disability and an immigrant background shared that his identities have made him more compassionate and better able to support his team. A Two-Spirit non-binary Indigenous leader with a disability shared that being an Indigenous leader made them bold, confident, and able to move things forward, as well as build relationships that centre on care and well-being. Additionally, a Mixtec/Mestizo descent gay

man originally from outside of Canada shared how his identities have made him a more inclusive and supportive leader.

In addition to these strengths, leaders also shared how their identities contributed to overworking and having unrealistic expectations of themselves and their teams. Many leaders shared that they had to work twice as hard as others to be seen as credible and had to over-deliver on their work. While this was a common experience among all identities in this study, leaders who are trans, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, and racialized shared how their multiple marginalized identities intensified this experience, with the need to overperform being deeply internalized.

**“There is some pressure, I don’t want other people to think I do not perform well due to being part of the LGBTQ community. So, I always aim for extra, go the**

**extra miles. Now, you know, aiming for the high quality and standard is kind of a part of me, [the] work version of me now.”**

— East Asian lesbian woman with an immigrant background

**“It’s drilled in me from my beginning that I have to, as the Black man, I have to work twice as hard. So, I’ve always worked twice as hard. So, when I’m on a team, I expect people to work twice as hard and sometimes that’s not achievable ... So, I have to check myself, it’s something that I’m very mindful of.”**

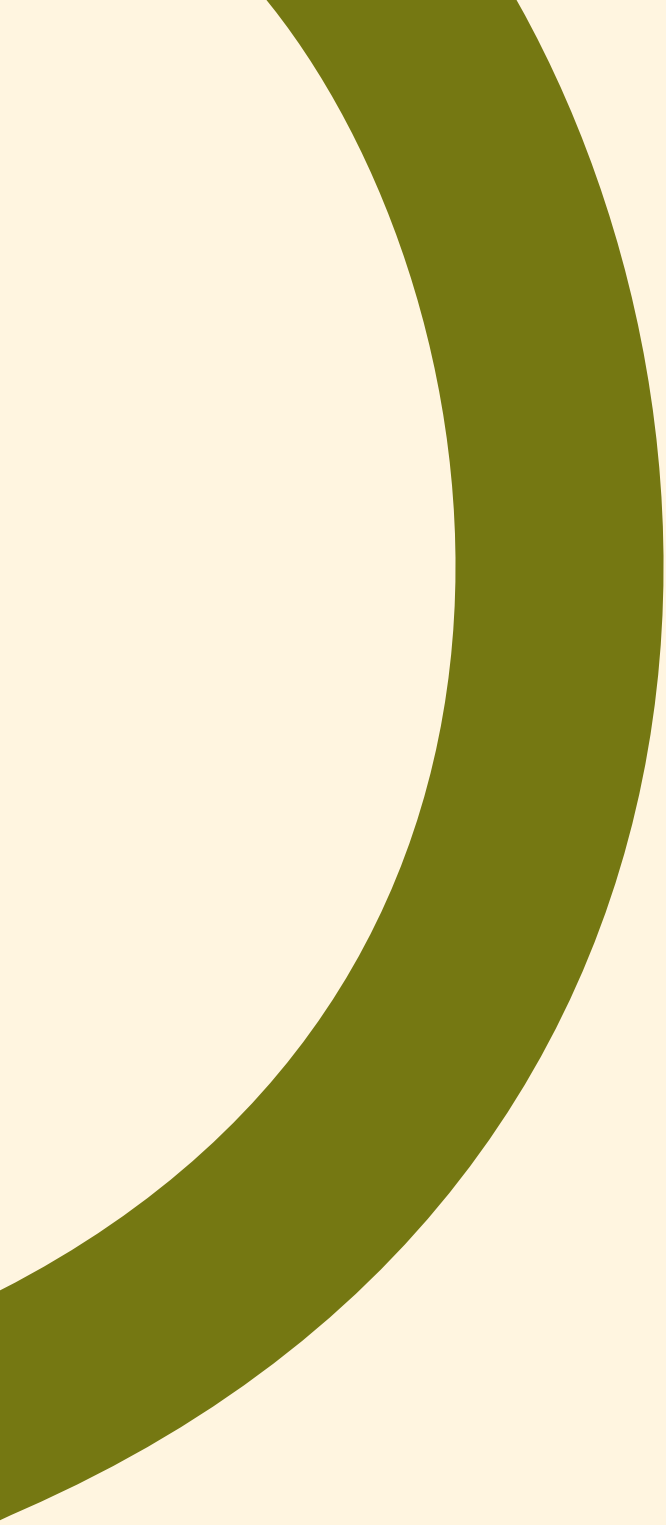
— Black gay man with an immigrant background

**“I had to over deliver on everything. Whether it was the most marginal error, nothing could be late, everything had to exceed expectations. I set such a high standard for me and every team I’ve ever led ... It’s so deeply ingrained, this fear that, you know, you’re gonna be let go, it’s not good enough, you failed.”**

— White non-binary neurodivergent leader

2SLGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled individuals bring unique perspectives to leadership as a result of their intersectional lived experiences. Despite experiencing marginalization, these leaders have developed skills, knowledge, and understanding that contribute positively to their leadership styles and abilities. Many have cultivated empathy, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, adaptability, inclusiveness, and resourcefulness, leading to leadership styles centred on relationship-building, trust, collaboration, community, and empowerment. These skills have been honed through the challenges of navigating multiple marginalized identities through experiences of discrimination, systemic racism, and oppression, resulting in leaders who are more resilient and better equipped to manage diverse teams. While these leaders face additional pressures to overperform and work twice as hard to be seen as credible, their experiences of intersectional marginalization have ultimately contributed to their unique strengths and abilities as leaders.





Self-

awareness

Boldness

Authenticity

Empathy

Charisma

Relationship-

building

Adaptability

Focus

Passion

# Recommendations for Employers

## Recommendation ①

# 2SLGBTQIA+

# Talent Retention and Advancement

An important part of leader development and employee advancement is employee retention. The two areas are mutually reinforcing, as an employee will not stay somewhere where they do not feel valued or where they do not see a future, and an organization cannot advance an employee who is leaving for another job. However, this study found that retention efforts often do not consider the unique needs and interests of 2SLGBTQIA+ employees and that important elements of retention, such as employer investment and advancement opportunities, are not accessible nor strategically planned for 2SLGBTQIA+ employees.

Strategic retention efforts that are responsive to the unique needs of a diverse workforce contribute to employee engagement and productivity, more positive workplace cultures, reduced costs from turnover, more effective recruitment, and strong leadership pipeline development. This means recognizing and responding through demonstrated and well-communicated policy and practice to what is needed for the retention of 2SLGBTQIA+ employees, including those who are also Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled (also see recommendation 3). The strategies described below were designed based on findings in this study, recommendations by leader and employer participants in this study, in consultation with community experts, and a review of best practices from Fosbrook et al., 2020; Santoro, S. & Walsh, M. 2022; Gruberg et al., 2018; and others included in the references section.





# Strategies for retaining and advancing 2SLGBTQIA+ talent may include:

Ensuring employee and healthcare benefits are inclusive and have an expanded definition of “family and partner” and cover adoption, surrogacy, fertility treatment, and retirement.

Ensuring healthcare coverage is trans and intersex inclusive, including extending such coverage to employee dependents, and pairing these benefits with an organizational employee transition/affirmation plan, including explanation of benefits, leadership support or sponsorship, organization-wide training, and protocols for name changes.

Creating policies and processes to support trans and non-binary employees updating employment documentation after a legal name change.

Creating policies and processes to ensure chosen names are used wherever possible (e.g., name cards, emails, online systems, etc.) even if not yet legally changed.

Ensuring employees have access to gender neutral washroom facilities at corporate offices, working sites, store and business fronts, etc. that employees will need to visit as part of their work.

Creating a gender-neutral dress code or not having a dress code to avoid creating arbitrary barriers related to white/cis/heteronormative ideas of professionalism that are exclusionary and harmful to employees who are trans, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled.

Investing in the professional development and career planning of 2SLGBTQIA+ employees through guided and supported conversations with managers and/or appointed mentors and sponsors.

For existing programs that do not target this group, advertising that participation by 2SLGBTQIA+ employees is encouraged and explaining the policies and practices that are in place to support this group.

Ensuring paths to advancement are transparent in the organization, including clear descriptions of necessary skills and competencies for different teams and levels, and procedures for initiating moves.

Ensuring that 2SLGBTQIA+ talent - including those who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled - is represented at all levels of the organization and that targets do not result in isolated representation, which can cause tokenization and overburdening of individuals who are expected to continuously act as a representative voice for their entire communities.

Creating opportunities for 2SLGBTQIA+ employees, including those who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled to participate in extended leadership teams, senior and executive working groups, and other upper-level councils and committees.

Ensuring managers and supervisors are accountable for providing career guidance and initiating career development and advancement conversations with their direct reports.

Creating dedicated spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ employees, as well as employees who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled, to meet and build community and relationships (e.g. spaces may be in the form of employee resource groups - also see recommendation 4).

# Strategies for retaining and advancing Black and Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ talent may include:

Creating mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship programs to advance Black and Indigenous employees in the workplace - this may involve Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and programs to support cultural and traditional practices.

Creating leader and professional development opportunities to support the career advancement of Black and Indigenous employees, and ensuring these opportunities are inclusive and relevant.

Ensuring representation of Black and Indigenous employees in succession planning and leadership pipeline development strategies, identifying rising talent, and communicating opportunities for advancement.

Providing funds and/or making space available for employees and job seekers to meet with Elders from their community or Indigenous counsellors. This may be relevant for individuals attending interviews, employees making career movement decisions, etc.

Creating cultural leave, flexible work, and remote work policies that acknowledge and support cultural needs and practices of Indigenous employees, as well as needs of employees with disabilities and those with caregiving duties.

Including Indigenous perspectives in the organization's practices, programs, and policies through ongoing engagement and collaboration with external partners to ensure unique challenges are addressed - this work can be initiated through a tailored organizational action plan created in compensated collaboration with Indigenous experts.

# Strategies for retaining and advancing 2SLGBTQIA+ newcomer/immigrant talent may include:

Creating job postings that state that the organization welcomes applications from 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals and newcomers for jobs at every level of the organization.

Developing a policy to accept temporary social insurance numbers during hiring.

Ensuring hiring committees are trained to work with newcomers so that applicants with unfamiliar names are not discriminated against on this basis.

Developing a practice to value non-Canadian work experience and volunteer experience, supporting newcomer employees to develop experience in Canadian industry context in their first few months of work, and communicating this in job postings.

Exploring policy options to allow employees to temporarily work remotely from another province or country for a limited time per year (e.g., 30 days, 3 months, or 6 months). Consult with an employment lawyer to develop the policy, identify risks and liabilities, and determine your organization's comfort with the amount of time you choose to offer.

Ensuring hiring committees are trained to work with trans and non-binary newcomers who may present documentation with names that do not reflect their gender identities and ensuring the job seeker or employee's correct name (not necessarily their legal name) is used throughout the process.

Creating advancement supports and opportunities, such as career planning, mentorship, sponsorship, and networking opportunities that are tailored to people who do not have extensive professional networks in Canada.

Creating spaces in which newcomer employees can connect with others who have immigrant backgrounds to share experiences, for example through employee resource groups or collectives.

**NOTE:** This work should understand that disclosure is a personal decision and not all 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals are open about their identities. Some may not be out at work or may not be out in their personal lives for a myriad of reasons. Therefore, less attention should be paid to having these employees share their stories publicly and instead, effort should be put into creating structural support and prioritizing inclusion.

## Recommendation ②

# Culture of Mentorship and Sponsorship

The well-established business case for workplace mentorship and sponsorship has shown these relationships cultivate employee retention, increase productivity and engagement, improve communication, and help develop leadership pipelines (Silva, 2010). Sponsors who act as allies and enable 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals to access opportunities and support can be transformative for the individual and beneficial to the organization. Additionally, formalized mentorship and sponsorship programs can help create accountable relationships and demonstrate an employer's or manager's investment in their employees; however, this study found that informal mentor relationships tend to be longer lasting and more influential.

In addition to building well-structured programs within the workplace, organizations can harness the power of mentorship and sponsorship by developing a mentorship culture and encouraging a mentoring mindset. For example, this study found that 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals benefit from having mentors/sponsors who share common identity traits and are able to understand and provide guidance about unique career challenges and needs 2SLGBTQIA+ community members may have. However, using identity traits as a pairing criteria in formalized workplace programs may feel tokenizing to both the mentor/sponsor and mentee/protégé. Therefore, there is both a need and opportunity for organizations to better cultivate environments where individuals can form these relationships organically. The strategies described below were designed based on findings in this study, recommendations by leader and employer participants in this study, and in partnership with **Mentor Canada**.

# Building a culture of mentorship and sponsorship may include:

Equipping senior leaders with the skills to be good mentors, sponsors, and allies in their relationships with 2SLGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled employees (e.g., training and resources to build skills for mentorship and sponsorship in these communities, recognition for allyship, etc.).

Creating opportunities for potential mentors-mentees and sponsors-protégés to connect with each other (e.g., hosting internal networking and team-building events, encouraging employees to volunteer externally, funding attendance to external events, etc.).

Creating opportunities for potential mentees and protégés to develop skills to prepare for, initiate, and build relationships with mentors and sponsors (e.g., training and resources to build skills for: identifying goals and needs for mentorship/sponsorship, identifying potential mentors/sponsors, introducing oneself to a mentor/sponsor, communicating career needs, having difficult conversations, receiving constructive criticism, etc.).

Actively encouraging mentorship and sponsorship by communicating the benefits to mentees and protégés, mentors and sponsors, teams and departments, and to the organization as a whole, as well as publicly recognizing and/or rewarding strong mentors and sponsors within the organization.

## Recommendation ③

# Culture of Accommodation

There is a need to develop workplace cultures of accommodation, as many 2SLGBTQIA+ leaders in this study expressed a hesitancy to disclose their disabilities for fear of being treated differently by colleagues, having supervisors make assumptions about their capabilities, and ultimately limiting their ability to be hired and advance in their careers. For many leaders, this meant not having access to the accommodations they needed to work effectively, and for some it meant having to overperform and justify their use of accommodations. The strategies described below were designed based on findings in this study, recommendations by participants in this study, a review of best practices, and in consultation with community experts.

Creating a culture around accommodation means establishing workplace systems and normalising the inclusion and accommodation of employees who have disabilities, as well as recognising that the unique skills and perspectives of these employees are valuable and that their inclusion is ultimately beneficial to the organization.

**NOTE:** Ensure you recognize the unique needs and intersecting challenges faced by trans, queer, Black, Indigenous, and racialized employees with disabilities, for example that these communities are less likely to request or receive needed accommodations.





# Building a culture of accommodation may include:

Ensuring job postings state that the organization welcomes applications from people with disabilities and list examples of the accommodations that can be offered or requested during hiring and onboarding.

Offering the option for teams to hold meetings virtually or for individuals to attend virtually as an accessibility and flexibility measure. Additionally, ensure the decision to hold meetings in-person is made equitably and that doing so does not infringe on employees' accessibility needs.

Managing conflicting accommodation needs in a compassionate way to ensure everyone can participate. For example, if one person is immunocompromised and needs others to be masked for in-person meetings, but another person is hard of hearing and needs to lip-read to participate, the meeting could be held virtually to enable accessible participation for all employees.

Increasing the number of sick days or offering unlimited sick days to employees.

Creating an ERG for employees with disabilities to share experiences and resources with one another and potentially identify mentors with disabilities.

Having a process in place to make ASL interpreters available to employees.

Ensuring that once appropriate accommodations are in place for an employee, those accommodations should be available in all work contexts and that employees do not need to continuously request and justify accommodation needs.

## Recommendation ④

# Employee Resource Groups as Spaces of Solidarity

While members of employee resource groups (ERGs) are already aware of the importance of having ally membership and sponsorship for enhancing inclusion and removing stigma from the workplace, this study found that allyship and solidarity between ERGs representing different identity groups is often missing in practice and can contribute to more inclusive workplaces. When ERGs work together, they are better positioned to address the needs of their members who have multiple marginalized identities and can more effectively address issues like homophobia, transphobia, racism, xenophobia, and ableism.

Evidence shows that ERGs are critical to the retention, recruitment, and advancement of underrepresented talent (McNamara, 2022). However, this study found that individuals who identify with multiple equity-deserving groups tend to join and feel welcome in only one ERG, usually citing racism and homophobia or transphobia as their reason for not joining or being their authentic selves in other ERGs. This trend has serious implications for the retention, advancement, and wellbeing of employees with multiple marginalized identities.

ERGs must work collaboratively towards shared goals and build solidarity with one another. In addition to collaborating to achieve intersectional goals, such as a Black ERG and a Mental Health ERG collaborating on an initiative for Black employee mental wellness, ERGs can challenge prejudices within their own group that may be preventing individuals from joining or being their authentic selves within these spaces. For example, the Pride ERG should actively challenge anti-Black racism within its membership, collaborate with Black ERGs towards shared goals, and promote allied membership from Black ERGs. Similarly, Black ERGs should actively challenge homophobia and transphobia within their membership, collaborate with Pride ERGs on projects that are both anti-racist and 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusive, and promote allied membership from the Pride ERG. This approach allows ERGs to better advocate based on the realities and experiences of employees with multiple marginalized identities.

## Recommendation ⑤

# Valuing the DEI Workload and Shifting Accountability

This study found that when senior professionals engage in DEI work, it is recognized and commended as good leadership and is sometimes considered during their performance reviews; conversely, when junior employees engage in DEI work outside of their regular job descriptions, it can cause stress and undermine work-life balance and is often not valued the same as working/billing hours in performance and advancement conversations, particularly in industries where billing hours are tied to advancement schedules.

DEI work done by volunteers and ERGs is essential to the culture and performance of organizations, enhances job satisfaction, and contributes to professional and leader development (Cordivano, 2019). Therefore, this work should be formally recognized and valued in career development and advancement conversations in the workplace. Examples of this may include: tracking hours spent on DEI work, reviewing hours spent on DEI work during performance reviews, and formalizing an enhanced performance mechanism. This may also include compensation for hours spent on DEI work, including for ERG leaders. An example of this is provided by Australia-based **Culture Amp** with practices that can be implemented in Canadian workplaces.

Additionally, leaders in this study shared how DEI work is often done at the side of an employee's desk (i.e., when it is not part of their job description or mandate) or is done by a single-person or small-team DEI department. In these cases, accountability for this extremely important and laborious work falls on the shoulders of just a few individuals, and often those who are meant to benefit from it. A promising practice that emerged in conversations with employers who are leading in diversity, equity, and inclusion is the integration of DEI work into the job descriptions and performance evaluation metrics for all managers, senior and executive leaders, and extended leadership teams (ELTs). DEI work requires the sponsorship of senior and executive leaders, therefore integrating its success into the success of the organization's leadership is an effective way of institutionalising accountability for this work. Examples of this may include key performance indicators (KPIs) such as: employee and direct report experience ratings; leadership attendance and engagement in DEI efforts; participation and sponsorship of ERGs; hiring and advancement trends over time in a leader's team; and development of skills for psychological safety, inclusive mentorship and sponsorship, and other DEI areas.

## Recommendation ⑥

# Mapping and Evaluating Employee Journeys

Underrepresentation of 2SLGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled people at senior and executive leadership levels is often related to slowed and restricted advancement along barriered career pathways, as reported by leaders in this study. While these experiences are common and well-known within these communities, many employers in this study reported that they do not track or document these experiences and therefore do not recognize differences in career journeys or progression for members of these communities.

Employee journey mapping and evaluation for 2SLGBTQIA+ employees, as well as employees who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled, can be used by employers to assess the speed and progression of their career journeys compared to the organization or industry norm or expectations in order to identify possible disparities and inequities needing intervention. Analysis of employee journeys is often done for employee segments based on role or position (Wowk, A. 2020); however, this practice can be expanded, with careful design, to map and evaluate the employee experiences for different identity groups to contribute to diversity, equity, and inclusion work as well as strategic talent management and leadership pipeline development.

This practice includes using demographic surveys, employee profiles, performance evaluations, employee experience surveys, etc., or potentially a third-party service, to collect data on career experiences and milestones for different employee groups, including related to recruitment, onboarding, retention, development, and exit. Data may be collected on a number of factors, such as: number of interviews offered; number of interviews resulting in employment offer; time to hire; number of career conversations; professional development plan; time to promotion; job satisfaction; work-life balance; involvement in workplace culture; length of employment; reason for leaving; etc. This information should be used solely for the purposes of demographic analysis, career movement evaluation, and informing policy, practices, programming, and strategic talent management initiatives.

## Recommendation ⑦

# Inclusive Service Providers for Leader Development

Providing professional development opportunities and investing in employees is essential for retention, engagement, and leadership pipeline development; however, in this study, leaders reported experiencing transphobia, misgendering, racism, and ableism by administrators and facilitators when participating in leader development programs, particularly external programs. The potential benefits of this programming are lost when service providers lack the capacity to work effectively with employees who are 2SLGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, racialized, or disabled, as they will likely cause harm and create an environment in which the employee cannot learn. Professional development for employees is an important investment and is expensive; therefore, these funds should not be wasted on service providers who are not equipped to work effectively with your employees.

Organizations must ensure that service providers chosen to deliver leader development programs, whether internally or externally, are equipped to work effectively and provide a safe and inclusive environment for all employees. For example, offering a non-binary employee a spot in a program for “High Performing Women” with a facilitator who is unaware of non-binary and transgender identities is not appropriate and can be extremely harmful and demotivating.

Organizations must be committed to offering appropriate opportunities for their employees by: finding service providers who demonstrate equity and inclusion in their practices and/or who specialize in working with different equity-deserving groups; creating a set of required practices for service providers to meet; and creating a set of guidelines for service providers to follow, including respect for pronouns, use of gender-neutral language, etc.

## Recommendation ⑧

# Upper-Level Recruitment and Leadership Pipeline Development

Employers and leaders in this study shared how senior, executive, and board recruitment often follow different rules and processes than entry- and mid-level recruitment and may include, for example, practices like succession planning, appointments, acting positions, network or referral-based recruitment, and use of executive recruitment agencies. However, this study found a significant misalignment between the strategies that employers reported using to increase recruitment of 2SLGBTQIA+ talent, and practices that are typically used to recruit for upper-level positions. For example, many employers reported using inclusive job postings to increase recruitment of 2SLGBTQIA+ talent; yet, all employers in this study reported that upper-level positions are rarely filled through open job postings.

While inclusive job posting is an important part of a recruitment strategy, as a sole practice it overlooks the realities of senior and executive recruitment. Therefore, a strategy for increasing representation at upper levels must include more realistic and relevant approaches. The strategies described below were designed based on findings in this study, recommendations by leader and employer participants, and a review of best practices from Davis, R. 2022; Randel, A. E. et al. 2021; and others included in the references section.

Ensuring senior and executive job postings use inclusive and gender-neutral language, state inclusive benefits are available for employees, and state that 2SLGBTQIA+ applicants are welcome.

Leveraging debiasing talent acquisition efforts through sourcing, screening, selecting, hiring, and onboarding in upper level recruitment (e.g., diverse hiring panels, standardized interview questions, documented criteria to avoid subjective definitions of “good fit”).

Developing a practice and ensuring hiring committees/decision makers understand how to value lived experiences, non-traditional career paths, non-Canadian work experience, and volunteer experiences in hiring conversations, particularly as they relate to a candidate’s knowledge of diverse stakeholders and broad audiences.

**NOTE:** Employers must also focus efforts and resources internally on leadership pipeline development to develop 2SLGBTQIA+ talent and ensure more diverse representation along pipelines. This circumvents the issue of having few diverse applicants for leadership positions by creating clear pathways for aspiring leaders and strong talent pools for organizations. Additionally, this contributes strongly to retention by enhancing employee engagement and demonstrating that there are opportunities within the upper ranks of the organization.

Creating opportunities for current employees and leaders to expand their networks in 2SLGBTQIA+ communities so they are aware of more diverse candidates.

Using succession planning as an opportunity to develop a pool of diverse candidates, ensuring that current leaders are trained and accountable for nominating diverse candidates or that selection is based on inclusive validated/standardized assessments.

Using non-advertised appointment processes and temporary acting positions to strategically advance 2SLGBTQIA+ talent and create pathways to leadership positions, with the support of a talent management or leadership pipeline development strategy. As well, ensure current leaders are accountable for the diversity of the candidates they consider, nominate, and/or select for such positions.

Ensuring that referral processes and programs include opportunities and/or incentives for the referral of diverse candidates and that current leaders and decision-makers are aware of the potential for bias to affect the referral and selection of diverse candidates.

Working with recruitment agencies that specialize in working with 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, demonstrate inclusive practices, and demonstrate diverse rosters.



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