National Ecosystem Consultation Summary

Immigration, Talent & Women's Entrepreneurship

Building Canada's Workforce, Businesses and Communities

Prepared by

Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada

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A National Collaboration

This report reflects the collective expertise of organizations supporting women entrepreneurs and newcomer entrepreneurs across Canada. Their contributions identify how immigration policy affects talent access, business continuity, entrepreneurship, regional growth, and community vitality.

The consultation was undertaken to inform the participation of WEOC in a July 14, 2026 roundtable with the Office of the Honourable Lena Metlege Diab, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, as part of the development of Canada's 2027-2029 Immigration Levels Plan.

Participating organizations from British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Yukon collectively support thousands of women and newcomer entrepreneurs.

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Immigrant Entrepreneur Canada

NLOWE
NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR ORGANIZATION OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

S.U.C.C.E.S.S.

Volition

WESK
WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS SASKATCHEWAN

WE BC

YUKONSTRUCT
meet. make. grow

The Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada (WEOC) is the national coordinating organization for Canada's women's enterprise and entrepreneurship ecosystem. WEOC works to strengthen women's participation in Canada's economy through ecosystem coordination, capital access, entrepreneurship pathways, strategic policy engagement, and national collaboration.

Through the WEOC Centre of Excellence, WEOC connects entrepreneurs, ecosystem organizations, investors, commercialization systems, and governments across the country to strengthen growth pathways, support ecosystem intelligence and coordination, and advance Canada's long-term economic competitiveness, productivity, and resilience.

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Executive Summary

As Canada prepares its 2027-2029 Immigration Levels Plan, women entrepreneurs offer a critical perspective on how immigration policy intersects with business growth, workforce stability, regional development, and economic inclusion. To inform a federal roundtable with the Office of the Honourable Lena Metlege Diab, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, WEOC conducted a rapid national consultation with eight organizations supporting women and newcomer entrepreneurs across six provinces and territories.

The consultation found that immigration is not simply a population or labour-supply issue for women-owned businesses. It is a business growth and continuity issue. Women entrepreneurs rely on newcomers as skilled employees, managers, seasonal workers, future business owners, successors, innovators, and community leaders. At the same time, newcomer women often encounter immigration-status restrictions, financing barriers, limited networks, credential-recognition challenges, and gendered barriers that constrain their ability to participate fully in entrepreneurship.

Consultation at a Glance

Indicator	Result
Organizations Consulted	8
Provinces/Territories Represented	6
Organizations rating workforce challenges moderate or significant	88%
Difficulty retaining employees	100%
Rural and remote workforce shortages	75%
Difficulty transitioning temporary workers to permanent residence	63%
Complexity of immigration programs	63%
Recognition of international credentials	50%
Organizations identifying rural and northern communities as a major opportunity	63%

What We Heard

Women-owned businesses are facing a layered talent challenge. They are struggling not only to recruit skilled employees, but also to retain trained workers, build management capacity, access specialized and skilled-trades talent, and plan for succession. These pressures are most pronounced in rural, northern, seasonal, and smaller labour markets.

The consultation also identified a structural mismatch between immigration systems and small-business realities. Programs can be complex, slow, difficult to navigate, and subject to changes that create uncertainty for both employers and workers. When a trained employee cannot transition to permanent residence, or when eligibility rules change during an application, the impact extends beyond the individual: it can disrupt operations, delay expansion, increase legal and administrative costs, and place business continuity at risk.

Six Key Findings

1. Workforce shortages are limiting business growth

Small businesses are struggling to find the skilled workers, tradespeople, technical talent, managers, and flexible staff they need. These shortages make it harder to serve customers, take on new opportunities, and grow.

2. Retaining employees is as important as recruiting them

Employers need greater certainty that workers who are already contributing to their businesses and communities will be able to remain in Canada. Clearer pathways to permanent residence are essential to long-term workforce stability.

3. Immigration programs are too complex and unpredictable

Changing requirements, processing delays, and fragmented federal and provincial pathways create uncertainty for small businesses. A simpler and more predictable system would make it easier for employers to plan, hire, and invest.

4. Newcomers contribute as entrepreneurs and employers

Newcomers do more than fill jobs. They start businesses, create employment, purchase existing companies, introduce new products and markets, and contribute to their communities. Immigration and entrepreneurship policies need to be better connected.

5. Rural, northern, and regional communities need tailored approaches

Smaller communities can benefit greatly from immigration, but attracting newcomers is only part of the solution. Housing, transportation, settlement services, employment opportunities, belonging, and clear pathways to remain are all necessary for long-term success.

6. Immigration pathways need to work for small businesses

Small and medium-sized businesses need clearer and more accessible ways to connect with skilled newcomers and newcomer entrepreneurs. Programs should reflect the realities and limited capacity of smaller employers, not only large organizations.

Recommendations

1. Make immigration pathways easier for small and medium-sized businesses to use when recruiting skilled newcomers and retaining workers who are already contributing in Canada.
2. Create a clear pathway to permanent residence for newcomer entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals who operate viable businesses and contribute to the Canadian economy.
3. Improve processing times, provide clearer program information, and protect applicants and employers when immigration rules or eligibility requirements change.
4. Better connect immigration programs with entrepreneurship supports, financing, settlement services, credential recognition, workforce development, and regional economic development.
5. Expand rural, northern, and regional immigration pathways while investing in the housing, transportation, settlement services, professional networks, and community supports needed to help newcomers stay.
6. Develop gender-responsive and culturally informed supports that address the specific barriers newcomer women face in employment, entrepreneurship, financing, and professional networks.

Key Conclusion

Canada should measure the success of its immigration system not only by how many people arrive, but by how effectively newcomers can contribute, remain, build businesses, create jobs, and strengthen communities.

Newcomers are not only part of Canada's workforce. They are also entrepreneurs, employers, innovators, and an important part of Canada's future economic capacity.

Introduction

In July 2026, the Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada (WEOC) was invited to participate in a consultation with the Office of the Honourable Lena Metlege Diab, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, focused on small and medium-sized businesses and the development of Canada's 2027–2029 Immigration Levels Plan.

To inform these discussions, WEOC conducted a targeted national consultation with organizations supporting women entrepreneurs across Canada. The consultation sought to identify workforce and talent challenges, barriers within Canada's immigration system, opportunities to strengthen business growth and workforce stability, and policy approaches that could better support small and medium-sized businesses, newcomer entrepreneurs, and regional communities.

Contributions were received from eight organizations representing six provinces and territories: S.U.C.C.E.S.S., Newfoundland and Labrador Organization of Women Entrepreneurs (NLOWE), Evol Financement, Women Entrepreneurs of Saskatchewan (WESK), Yukonstruct Society, Immigrant Entrepreneur Canada, Volition, and WeBC. Together, these organizations contributed perspectives from British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Yukon, reflecting a range of urban, rural, northern, Francophone, newcomer, and growth-oriented contexts.

Input was gathered through a structured consultation survey and direct stakeholder outreach. Responses included both quantitative data and qualitative insights based on organizations' direct experience supporting women entrepreneurs, newcomer entrepreneurs, employers, and small businesses.

The purpose of the consultation was to:

- Inform WEOC's participation in the federal consultation on Canada's 2027–2029 Immigration Levels Plan;
- Identify workforce, immigration, and retention challenges affecting women-owned and newcomer-led businesses;
- Highlight opportunities for immigration policy to support entrepreneurship, business growth, workforce stability, and regional economic development; and
- Contribute to the evidence base being developed through WEOC's Centre of Excellence for Women's Entrepreneurship.

The findings reflect the perspectives of participating organizations working directly with women and newcomer entrepreneurs. They are intended to inform policy, ecosystem coordination, and initiatives that strengthen workforce participation, entrepreneurship, and economic growth across Canada. The recommendations represent WEOC's synthesis of the evidence and may not reflect every participating organization's individual position.

Finding 1: Workforce and Talent Constraints Are Limiting Growth

Women-owned businesses are facing a broad and persistent talent challenge that affects both day-to-day operations and long-term growth.

Seven of the eight participating organizations, or 88 percent, rated workforce and talent pressures as moderate or significant. Respondents described difficulty finding and keeping skilled workers across a wide range of roles, including skilled trades, technical positions, sales, digital marketing, administration, operations, hospitality, mining, customer service, and management.

Several organizations emphasized that small businesses often need employees who can do more than fill a narrowly defined role. They need people who can combine technical skills with flexibility, take on multiple responsibilities, and grow into supervisory or management positions as the business expands.

Most Significant Workforce and Talent Challenges Identified

Challenge	Organizations	% of Organizations
Difficulty Retaining Employees	8 of 8	100%
Rural or Remote Workforce Shortages	6 of 8	75%
Leadership or Management Talent Shortages	4 of 8	50%
Difficulty Recruiting Skilled Employees	4 of 8	50%
Business Succession Challenges	4 of 8	50%
Skilled Trades Shortages	4 of 8	50%
Specialized Technical Talent Shortages	3 of 8	38%
Seasonal Labour Shortages	3 of 8	38%

The table shows that recruitment is only one part of the challenge. Every participating organization identified difficulty retaining employees, while many also reported shortages in rural and remote communities, management talent, skilled trades, and succession planning. These pressures often overlap and make it harder for businesses to plan with confidence.

Retention emerged as the most consistent concern. Businesses may successfully recruit and train workers, but uncertainty about whether those employees can remain in Canada can undermine workforce stability and discourage longer-term investment.

Business succession is also part of the talent challenge. When owners cannot find qualified employees, managers, or potential successors, otherwise viable businesses may struggle to continue, transfer ownership, or remain in their communities.

The Talent Gap Is Also a Scale-Up Gap

The roles identified through the consultation are the same roles that allow businesses to move beyond founder-led operations.

Sales professionals help generate revenue and reach new customers. Administrative and operations staff create capacity. Technical workers support specialized services and innovation. Managers allow founders to delegate and focus on strategy. Skilled tradespeople and seasonal workers help businesses meet demand in sectors where labour cannot easily be replaced.

A founder may be able to launch and operate a small business with limited staff. Growth, however, requires reliable employees, specialized expertise, stronger sales capacity, operational leadership, and management depth. When these roles cannot be filled, businesses may turn down contracts, delay expansion, reduce service levels, or remain too dependent on the founder.

Participating organizations highlighted different needs across regions and sectors. NLOWE identified shortages in skilled trades, customer service, administration, digital marketing, technical roles, and employees able to move into operational or supervisory positions. WeBC emphasized sales, technology-enabled administration and operations, management talent, and workers in rural and remote communities. Yukonstruct highlighted skilled trades and technical talent, while WESK identified workforce needs in mining, trades, and hospitality.

These contributions point to a consistent national issue. Women-owned businesses need access to people who can help them operate, adapt, and grow. Immigration planning should therefore reflect the realities of small businesses, whose workforce needs may not be fully captured by broad national vacancy data or large-employer forecasts.

Key Takeaway

For women entrepreneurs, access to talent is access to growth. Without the right people, businesses cannot fully serve customers, take on new opportunities, build management capacity, or scale.

Finding 2: Retention Is as Important as Recruitment

The strongest point of agreement in the consultation was that recruiting workers is only part of the challenge. Every participating organization identified difficulty retaining employees.

For small businesses, retention is closely tied to stability and growth. Employers invest time and resources in onboarding, training, professional development, and relationship building. When a worker's immigration status is uncertain, or when there is no realistic pathway to permanent residence, that investment is placed at risk.

Five of the eight organizations identified difficulty transitioning temporary workers to permanent residence as one of the immigration barriers most affecting women entrepreneurs. Program complexity was identified just as often.

Immigration-Related Barriers Identified

Barrier	Organizations	% of Organizations
Difficulty transitioning temporary workers to permanent residence	5 of 8	63%
Complexity of immigration programs	5 of 8	63%
Recognition of international credentials	4 of 8	50%
Processing times	3 of 8	38%
Limited awareness of pathways	2 of 8	25%
Difficulty accessing skilled talent	2 of 8	25%
Regional labour shortages	2 of 8	25%
Housing availability affecting recruitment	1 of 8	13%

The table shows that retention challenges are not caused by one issue alone. They are connected to complex programs, uncertain pathways to permanent residence, processing delays, credential recognition, limited awareness of available options, regional labour shortages, and housing pressures.

Together, these barriers create financial, administrative, and emotional costs for both workers and employers. A business may successfully recruit and train an employee, but still face the possibility of losing that person because their immigration status cannot be secured or because program requirements change. Small businesses may incur legal and application expenses, lose company-specific knowledge, delay investment, and face uncertainty about whether critical roles can be maintained.

Workforce Stability Requires Pathways to Stay

Volition shared the example of a woman-owned business that recruited and trained a key employee through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. After two years, the employee applied for permanent residence. While the application was in process, the scoring rules changed and the employee no longer qualified.

The business incurred additional legal and Labour Market Impact Assessment costs and faced the possible loss of an employee who was being prepared for a management role. The case shows how immigration uncertainty can become a business-continuity risk.

Respondents emphasized that retention depends on more than immigration status alone. Workers and their families are more likely to remain when they can access housing, transportation, settlement services, credential recognition, professional networks, and a sense of belonging. S.U.C.C.E.S.S. highlighted the importance of practical pre-arrival and employment-readiness supports, while NLOWE emphasized the value of coordinated immigration, settlement, financing, and entrepreneurship supports.

Regional organizations also noted that delays and permit restrictions can have an especially significant impact in rural and northern communities. Yukonstruct reported that slow processing and barriers within work-permit and regional immigration systems can prevent workers and entrepreneurs from contributing where their skills are most urgently needed.

Small businesses are particularly vulnerable to this kind of disruption. Unlike larger employers, they may have limited capacity to absorb repeated legal costs, restart recruitment, replace company-specific knowledge, or operate for long periods with a vacancy in a critical role.

Respondents also called for greater mobility for workers who are already in Canada. More flexible movement between employers and regions could help workers find communities that better meet their housing, family, employment, and social needs. It could also help small businesses connect with available talent without requiring workers and employers to restart costly and time-consuming processes.

Retention also depends on whether workers and their families can build stable lives in the communities where they are employed. A job alone may not be enough if housing is unavailable, family members cannot find work, or workers do not have access to settlement services and social networks.

What This Means

The success of an immigration pathway should not be measured only by whether a worker enters Canada or fills an immediate vacancy. It should also consider whether that person can remain, build a stable life, contribute to the community, and continue working for an employer that has invested in their development.

Clearer transitions to permanent residence, predictable program rules, and greater mobility for workers already in Canada would provide more stability for both employees and small businesses.

Key Takeaway

Recruitment fills a vacancy. Retention builds a business. Clear pathways to permanent residence, predictable rules, and practical mobility options are essential to workforce stability for women-owned small and medium-sized businesses.

Finding 3: Complexity and Uncertainty Create Business Risk

Respondents consistently described an immigration system that is difficult for small businesses and newcomers to understand and navigate.

Federal and provincial pathways can involve different eligibility rules, documentation requirements, timelines, scoring systems, and application processes. Employers may feel they need legal or immigration professionals simply to determine which options are available and whether a worker or entrepreneur qualifies.

This can create an uneven playing field, as larger employers are more likely to have dedicated human-resources teams or access to specialized legal support, while smaller businesses must navigate the same system with far fewer resources.

For women entrepreneurs operating with limited administrative capacity, this complexity creates a disproportionate burden. Time spent interpreting program rules, preparing applications, correcting documentation, and responding to changing criteria is time diverted from customers, employees, financing, and business growth.

Processing delays add another layer of risk. Several organizations identified long timelines as a significant barrier, while respondents in Quebec and Yukon called for faster processing for skilled workers, seasonal workers, and entrepreneurs. Yukonstruct noted that delays and inaccurate permits can prevent newcomers from returning to entrepreneurship or contributing in communities where their skills are urgently needed.

Complexity also affects newcomers directly. S.U.C.C.E.S.S. emphasized the importance of practical guidance before arrival on labour-market expectations, workplace culture, credential recognition, licensing requirements, and supports available in the intended destination. Without this early navigation, newcomers may face delays entering the workforce, underemployment, or missed opportunities to use their skills and experience.

Predictability Is an Economic Policy Tool

Immigration policies and program requirements will sometimes need to change. Respondents emphasized, however, that changes should be communicated clearly and introduced with reasonable transition periods.

Applicants and employers may already have invested significant time, money, and effort based on the rules in place when an application began. When eligibility requirements or scoring systems change without sufficient notice, the consequences can include additional legal fees, repeated applications, lost time, workforce disruption, and considerable stress for both workers and employers.

These risks are especially significant for small businesses. A large employer may be able to absorb delays, legal costs, or the loss of a worker. A small business may be relying on one person to deliver a critical service, manage operations, support customers, or prepare for future leadership.

The consultation suggests that predictability should be treated as an economic policy objective. Stable and understandable pathways allow employers to make hiring and investment decisions with greater confidence. They also allow workers to invest in language training, credential recognition, professional development, and long-term settlement.

Clearer information and stronger navigation supports would benefit both businesses and newcomers. Respondents called for practical, accessible guidance that explains available pathways, eligibility requirements, processing steps, and the implications of program changes.

What This Means

Immigration targets alone do not determine the economic impact of immigration. The accessibility, stability, and usability of the programs beneath those targets shape whether businesses can recruit, retain, and plan for growth.

A simpler and more predictable system would reduce costs, help newcomers use their skills sooner, and allow small businesses to make workforce decisions with greater confidence.

Key Takeaway

For a small business, immigration complexity is not simply an administrative inconvenience. It can increase costs, delay hiring and growth, undermine workforce planning, and place business continuity at risk.

Finding 4: Newcomers Are Entrepreneurs and Employers, Not Only Workers

A central theme of the consultation was that immigration discussions often focus too narrowly on newcomers as a source of labour. Respondents emphasized that newcomers also contribute as entrepreneurs, business owners, employers, innovators, exporters, successors, and community leaders.

This broader contribution matters because newcomer entrepreneurs do more than create employment for themselves. They can start or acquire businesses, create jobs for others, introduce new products and services, enter new markets, support business succession, generate tax revenue, and strengthen local communities.

Opportunities for Immigration to Strengthen Women's Entrepreneurship

Opportunity	Organizations	% of Organizations
Strengthening rural and northern communities	5 of 8	63%
Encouraging entrepreneurship	4 of 8	50%
Supporting high-growth businesses	3 of 8	38%
Population growth and community vitality	3 of 8	38%
Business succession	3 of 8	38%
Addressing labour shortages	2 of 8	25%
Export growth	2 of 8	25%
Supporting Francophone communities	1 of 8	13%
Innovation and commercialization	1 of 8	13%

The responses show that the economic value of immigration extends well beyond filling existing vacancies. Participating organizations identified entrepreneurship, business growth, succession, exports, innovation, and community vitality as important opportunities.

Entrepreneurship Supports Are Not Always Accessible

NLOWE emphasized that some newcomer women arrive in Canada with professional experience, business knowledge, established networks, and viable business ideas. Despite this experience, they may be unable to access entrepreneurship programming or financing because of their immigration status, limited Canadian credit history, or unfamiliarity with the Canadian business-support system.

NLOWE's Origin to Opportunity Lab was designed to help address this gap by connecting settlement and entrepreneurship supports. The initiative combines business education, mentorship, peer connection, and ecosystem navigation to help newcomer women move from an idea or prior experience toward business participation in Canada.

This example highlights a broader challenge. Immigration, settlement, entrepreneurship, and financing systems are often delivered separately, even though newcomer entrepreneurs may need support across all four areas at the same time.

Supporting Entrepreneurial Talent Can Improve Retention

Immigrant Entrepreneur Canada identified international graduates as an underused source of entrepreneurial talent. The organization proposed a performance-based entrepreneurship pathway for graduates of Canadian MBA programs who launch or acquire businesses and demonstrate sustained economic contribution through revenue, tax filings, employment, and growth.

This approach would recognize that some newcomers make their strongest economic contribution through entrepreneurship rather than conventional employment. It would also provide a clearer reason for entrepreneurial graduates to remain in Canada and continue building their businesses here.

WeBC shared the example of a newcomer woman entrepreneur who initially faced financing barriers because she had limited Canadian credit history. She went on to build and sell businesses, launch additional ventures, serve in municipal office, lead provincial municipal organizations, and contribute through boards and civic leadership.

Her experience demonstrates the long-term multiplier effect of supporting newcomer entrepreneurs. The value of one entrepreneur can extend far beyond a single business to include employment, investment, tax revenue, mentorship, public leadership, and broader community contribution.

Business Succession Is Part of the Opportunity

Respondents also identified business succession as an important area where immigration and entrepreneurship policy could be better connected.

Many viable small businesses need new owners as their founders retire or step back. Newcomers with business experience, professional expertise, or access to international markets may be well positioned to acquire and grow these businesses. Supporting newcomer entrepreneurship can therefore help preserve existing businesses, jobs, services, and economic activity, particularly in smaller communities.

What This Means

Immigration policy should consider not only whether newcomers can fill existing jobs, but also whether they can create businesses, acquire viable companies, employ others, introduce innovation, and contribute to regional development.

When an entrepreneur is unable to remain in Canada, access financing, or qualify for business supports, Canada may lose more than one potential resident. It may also lose future jobs, tax revenue, exports, business succession, innovation, and community leadership.

Better coordination between immigration pathways, entrepreneurship programming, financing, settlement services, and regional economic development would help Canada make fuller use of newcomer talent.

Key Takeaway

Newcomers are not only part of Canada's workforce. They are also entrepreneurs, employers, innovators, successors, exporters, and community leaders. Immigration policy should recognize and support the full range of economic value they can create.

Finding 5: Rural, Northern, and Regional Communities Require Tailored Approaches

Rural, northern, and regional communities have much to gain from immigration. Newcomers can help address labour shortages, support population growth, start or acquire businesses, contribute to business succession, and strengthen community vitality.

Participating organizations also made clear that regional immigration cannot succeed through attraction alone. Encouraging newcomers to settle outside major centres is only the first step. Long-term success depends on whether individuals and families can find suitable housing, access transportation and settlement services, build professional and social networks, find employment opportunities for spouses or partners, and develop a genuine sense of belonging.

Regional Immigration Can Support Economic and Community Growth

The consultation identified rural and northern communities as an important opportunity for immigration policy. At the same time, workforce shortages in rural and remote areas emerged as one of the most common challenges reported by participating organizations.

Regional opportunity or challenge	Organizations	% of Organizations
Strengthening rural and northern communities	5 of 8	63%
Rural or remote workforce shortages	6 of 8	75%

These findings point to both a need and an opportunity. Smaller communities often require workers, entrepreneurs, business successors, and population growth, but they may also face greater difficulty attracting and retaining newcomers than larger urban centres.

Yukonstruct described foreign workers and newcomer entrepreneurs as critical to rural and northern economies. It also noted that permit delays, nominee-program challenges, and regulatory barriers can prevent people from contributing where their skills and experience are most needed.

NLOWE emphasized that regional immigration strategies should connect newcomers' skills and entrepreneurial ambitions with local economic strengths and business-succession opportunities. This could help communities retain viable businesses, preserve local services, and create stronger pathways into entrepreneurship.

WESK supported better alignment between immigration and regions that need workforce and population growth. It also stressed the importance of customized supports for newcomer women, including flexible delivery, family-inclusive programming, and accessible pathways into local business networks and markets.

Regional Attraction Must Be Matched by Retention Infrastructure

Respondents cautioned that newcomers cannot be expected to remain in communities where the conditions for stability are not in place.

Housing availability and affordability can affect whether workers accept or remain in a position. Limited transportation can make it difficult to reach employment, services, education, and community activities. Smaller settlement organizations may have limited capacity, while spouses and family members may struggle to find suitable employment or build social and cultural connections.

These conditions affect both workers and entrepreneurs. A newcomer may have a viable business idea or valuable professional experience, but still be unable to build a sustainable future in a community without access to financing, business networks, childcare, transportation, settlement services, or local market connections.

S.U.C.C.E.S.S. emphasized that pre-arrival and settlement services should be understood as part of Canada's workforce infrastructure. Stronger employer engagement before arrival, destination-specific information, and practical guidance can improve job matching and reduce underemployment. Continued settlement support after arrival is equally important to belonging, family stability, and long-term retention.

A Tailored Approach Is Necessary

Rural, northern, and regional communities differ in their labour markets, industries, infrastructure, population needs, and capacity to support newcomers. A single national model is unlikely to work equally well in every community.

Regional immigration approaches should therefore be designed around local conditions. This includes connecting immigration with housing, transportation, settlement services, workforce development, entrepreneurship supports, financing, business succession, and community-building initiatives.

Programs should also recognize the distinct barriers newcomer women may face, including caregiving responsibilities, limited professional networks, access to financing, credential recognition, and the need for culturally responsive and flexible supports.

What This Means

Regional immigration policy should be treated as a community and economic development strategy, not simply as a way to distribute newcomers across the country.

Attraction, employment, entrepreneurship, settlement, housing, transportation, family stability, and belonging need to be planned together. Without this broader infrastructure, communities may succeed in recruiting newcomers but struggle to retain them.

Key Takeaway

Rural, northern, and regional immigration can strengthen Canada’s workforce, businesses, and communities. Sustainable success, however, requires more than a nomination or work permit. It requires communities that are equipped to help newcomers build viable lives, careers, businesses, and lasting connections.

Finding 6: Canada Needs Immigration Pathways That Work for Small Businesses

Canada's immigration system does not consistently reflect the realities of small and medium-sized businesses.

Unlike large employers, SMEs often do not have dedicated human-resources teams, immigration specialists, or the administrative capacity to navigate complex programs. They may be trying to hire only one or two people, but those workers can be essential to the business. Small firms may also need employees with a specific combination of technical skills, flexibility, and the potential to grow into supervisory or leadership roles.

Respondents identified several ways immigration pathways could better support small businesses. These included clearer routes to permanent residence for workers already contributing in Canada, stronger connections between skilled newcomers and women-owned SMEs, practical pathways for newcomer entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals, entrepreneurship options for international graduates, and greater mobility for work-permit holders.

Immigration Pathways Identified as Important

Immigration pathway	Organizations	% of Organizations
Permanent economic immigration	4 of 8	50%
International students	4 of 8	50%
Provincial Nominee Programs	4 of 8	50%
Temporary Foreign Worker Program	4 of 8	50%
Rural and regional immigration programs	3 of 8	38%
Entrepreneur immigration	3 of 8	38%
Francophone immigration	1 of 8	13%
Start-up Visa Program	1 of 8	13%

The range of pathways identified reflects the diversity of small-business needs across regions and sectors. Some businesses rely on permanent economic immigration. Others depend on international graduates, provincial nominee programs, temporary workers, rural and regional pathways, or entrepreneur immigration.

No single program can address every need. The consultation instead points to the need for a more coordinated and accessible system that helps small businesses understand which pathway is appropriate and how to use it.

A Coordinated Pathway From Arrival to Economic Contribution

A small-business-centred approach should not be limited to a single immigration stream. Immigration pathways need to connect with the other supports that help newcomers and businesses succeed, including credential recognition, settlement services, employer navigation, entrepreneurship training, financing, mentorship, and regional economic development.

For newcomer entrepreneurs, the system should recognize international professional and business experience. Limited Canadian credit history or temporary immigration status should not unnecessarily prevent someone with a viable business from accessing appropriate entrepreneurship supports or financing.

Respondents also called for clearer guidance on how self-employment and business ownership affect immigration applications. Entrepreneurs need to understand which activities are permitted, how their economic contribution will be assessed, and what evidence is required to demonstrate business viability.

For employers, the system should provide plain-language information, predictable processing, practical navigation support, and an efficient way to retain workers who have already demonstrated their value. Small businesses should not need extensive legal support simply to understand their options.

For workers, pathways should provide fairness, greater mobility, and a realistic opportunity to establish permanent roots. More flexible movement between employers or regions could help workers find the right long-term fit while allowing small businesses to connect with talent already in Canada.

Supporting Employers and Protecting Workers Are Compatible Goals

Canada does not need to choose between helping small businesses recruit talent and protecting workers from unfair or unstable conditions.

A well-designed system can support both. Clear pathways to permanent residence can reduce worker vulnerability. Greater mobility can improve job matching and give workers more choice. Better employer guidance can reduce errors and delays. Stronger connections to settlement and entrepreneurship supports can improve long-term economic participation.

The goal should be a system in which workers can build stable lives and small businesses can make responsible hiring, investment, and growth decisions with greater confidence.

What This Means

Immigration levels alone do not guarantee economic impact. The pathways beneath those targets must be understandable, accessible, and practical for the businesses expected to use them.

Immigration pathways that reflect the realities of SMEs would help translate immigration into stronger businesses, better workforce matches, higher retention, and more inclusive economic growth.

Key Takeaway

Immigration pathways need to work for small businesses, not only large employers. Clearer access, practical navigation, predictable processing, worker mobility, and realistic routes to permanent residence would help newcomers contribute, remain, and build lasting economic connections in Canada.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Develop Immigration Pathways That Work for Small Businesses

The Government of Canada should make immigration pathways easier for small and medium-sized businesses to use when recruiting skilled newcomers and retaining workers who are already contributing in Canada.

This could be achieved through a dedicated pathway, a designated stream, or improvements to existing programs. The approach should reflect the limited administrative capacity of smaller employers and recognize that one or two key workers can be critical to business continuity and growth.

Potential Actions

- Develop a streamlined employer pathway tailored to SMEs with verified labour and growth needs.
- Provide plain-language guidance and dedicated navigation support for small employers.
- Recognize growth-enabling roles, including sales, operations, technical, skilled trades, and management positions.
- Create efficient routes to permanent residence for workers with sustained employment, demonstrated contribution, and established community ties.
- Improve connections between women-owned SMEs and skilled newcomers already in Canada.

Expected Outcome: Improved access to talent, stronger employee retention, reduced workforce disruption, and greater growth capacity for women-owned small and medium-sized businesses.

Recommendation 2: Establish a Clear Pathway for Newcomer Entrepreneurs and Self-Employed Individuals

The Government of Canada should create a practical pathway to permanent residence for newcomer entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals who operate viable businesses and demonstrate sustained economic contribution in Canada. The pathway should recognize that newcomers can contribute not only as workers, but also as business owners, employers, successors, innovators, exporters, and community leaders.

Potential Actions

- Assess business viability using evidence such as revenue, tax compliance, employment, growth, capacity to repay, and community contribution.
- Recognize professional, entrepreneurial, and business experience gained outside Canada.
- Clarify how self-employment and business ownership affect work authorization and eligibility for permanent residence.
- Ensure temporary immigration status or limited Canadian credit history does not unnecessarily prevent viable entrepreneurs from accessing appropriate business supports or financing.
- Connect eligible entrepreneurs with financing, mentorship, market access, settlement services, and business-development supports.
- Consider entrepreneurship pathways for international graduates who establish or acquire viable businesses in Canada.

Expected Outcome: Increased business creation, job creation, business succession, innovation, export activity, and long-term economic participation.

Recommendation 3: Improve Predictability, Processing Times, and Transition Protections

Immigration pathways should be faster, clearer, and more predictable for applicants and small employers. Changes to immigration criteria may sometimes be necessary, but they should be communicated clearly and introduced in ways that reduce disruption for people and businesses that have already made decisions based on existing rules.

Potential Actions

- Establish clear service standards for priority small-business, regional, and entrepreneurial applications.
- Provide applicants and employers with timely, plain-language information about requirements, timelines, and application status.
- Give reasonable notice when eligibility criteria, scoring systems, or program requirements change.
- Provide transition protections for applicants already substantially advanced in a pathway.
- Improve coordination and consistency between federal and provincial immigration programs.
- Reduce errors, delays, and unnecessary duplication in permit and application processing.

Expected Outcome: Lower administrative and legal costs, stronger workforce planning, greater confidence for applicants and employers, and reduced business-continuity risk.

Recommendation 4: Better Connect Immigration, Settlement, and Entrepreneurship Supports

Immigration planning should be connected to the systems that determine whether newcomers can participate fully in Canada's workforce and economy. Newcomers may need support with employment, credential recognition, settlement, financing, entrepreneurship, licensing, professional networks, and market access at the same time. These services should be easier to navigate and better coordinated.

Potential Actions

- Expand practical pre-arrival guidance on employment, entrepreneurship, workplace expectations, credential recognition, licensing, and destination-specific supports.
- Strengthen credential-recognition and professional-licensing navigation.
- Create coordinated referral pathways among immigration, settlement, financing, workforce-development, and entrepreneurship organizations.
- Ensure international students and temporary residents can access appropriate information about entrepreneurship and self-employment.
- Connect newcomer entrepreneurs with mentorship, peer networks, financing, and market-development opportunities.
- Improve coordination between immigration policy and regional economic-development strategies.

Expected Outcome: Faster labour-market participation, reduced underemployment, stronger newcomer business outcomes, and more effective use of newcomers' skills and experience.

Recommendation 5: Build Rural, Northern, and Regional Retention Strategies Around Community Capacity

The Government of Canada should expand rural, northern, and regional immigration pathways while investing in the conditions that help newcomers remain and succeed. Regional immigration should be treated as both a workforce strategy and a community-development strategy. Attracting newcomers without addressing housing, transportation, settlement capacity, family needs, and belonging is unlikely to produce sustainable retention.

Potential Actions

- Align regional immigration streams with local workforce needs, economic strengths, entrepreneurship opportunities, and business-succession needs.
- Invest in housing, transportation, settlement services, childcare, professional networks, and community integration.

- Support employer and community readiness before newcomers arrive.
- Provide destination-specific information and pre-arrival connections to employers, services, and local networks.
- Expand employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for spouses and family members.
- Provide sufficient mobility and flexibility so workers can find sustainable employment and a community where they can build a stable life.

Expected Outcome: Stronger rural and northern economies, improved newcomer retention, preserved local businesses and services, and greater community vitality.

Recommendation 6: Apply a Gender-Responsive Lens to Immigration and Entrepreneurship

The Immigration Levels Plan should recognize that newcomer women may face overlapping barriers related to immigration status, gender, caregiving responsibilities, cultural expectations, discrimination, professional networks, credential recognition, and access to capital. Programs should be designed to reflect these realities and ensure that newcomer women can participate fully in employment, entrepreneurship, and community life.

Potential Actions

- Fund culturally informed and women-centred entrepreneurship programming.
- Provide flexible and family-inclusive delivery models.
- Ensure newcomer women receive direct, accessible information about workplace rights, immigration pathways, business supports, and economic opportunities.
- Improve access to financing, mentorship, professional networks, and credential-recognition support.
- Review program eligibility rules for unintended barriers affecting newcomer women entrepreneurs.
- Include gender-responsive analysis in the design and evaluation of immigration, settlement, and entrepreneurship programs.

Expected Outcome: More equitable economic participation, stronger business outcomes, and greater realization of newcomer women's entrepreneurial potential.

Conclusion: A Team Canada Opportunity

This consultation demonstrates that immigration policy is closely connected to business growth, workforce stability, entrepreneurship, and regional development.

Women entrepreneurs need access to skilled and flexible talent, as well as greater certainty that they can retain employees in whom they have invested. Newcomer women need pathways that recognize their skills, experience, and entrepreneurial potential. Rural, northern, and regional communities need immigration strategies that are connected to housing, transportation, settlement services, family stability, belonging, and local economic opportunity. Small businesses need a system they can understand and use without disproportionate legal, financial, and administrative burden.

The findings also point to a broader economic opportunity. Newcomers are not only workers entering Canada's labour market. They are also potential founders, employers, business successors, exporters, innovators, investors, civic leaders, and community builders. Immigration planning that recognizes this full contribution can strengthen businesses, create jobs, support community vitality, and improve long-term economic inclusion.

As Canada balances sustainable immigration levels with infrastructure capacity and public confidence, success should not be measured only by the number of people admitted. It should also be measured by whether newcomers are able to contribute, remain, build stable lives, grow businesses, create employment, and strengthen the communities in which they settle.

Achieving this will require immigration pathways that are clear, predictable, and practical; stronger coordination across immigration, settlement, entrepreneurship, financing, and workforce-development systems; and regional strategies that match attraction with the capacity to support long-term retention.

Canada has an opportunity to build an immigration system that works better for newcomers, small businesses, women entrepreneurs, and communities. Doing so will require a Team Canada approach that connects immigration policy with economic development and recognizes newcomers as an essential part of Canada's future workforce, entrepreneurial capacity, and community strength.

Final Takeaway

Canada should measure immigration success not only by how many people arrive, but by how many are able to stay, contribute, build businesses, create jobs, and strengthen communities.

Women's Enterprise
Organizations of Canada