

Project Insights Report

Developing Women Leaders in the Digital Economy



PARTNERS

Diversity Institute

Women in
Communications and
Technology



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



INVESTMENT

\$160,000



PUBLISHED

February 2025



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Executive Summary

Despite increasing numbers of women entering the digital workforce, their representation in senior positions remains disproportionately low. This gap is driven by persistent gender stereotypes, biases in recruitment and promotion, and workplace cultures that favour masculine norms, creating environments where women feel unwelcomed or excluded. These challenges, coupled with a lack of mentorship and supportive networks, make it difficult for women to advance in the digital economy.

To address these barriers, Women in Communications and Technology (WCT), in collaboration with the Future Skills Centre and the Diversity Institute, implemented the Roberta Bondar STEM Career Development Program and, more recently, the Opening Doors program. These initiatives aim to equip women with the necessary skills, mentorship and networking opportunities to succeed in leadership roles. By focusing on mentorship, skills development and resource support, these programs seek to build a strong leadership pipeline for women, reducing isolation and fostering a sense of belonging.

Launched in 2016, the Roberta Bondar STEM Career Development Program supported nearly 100 women, non-binary and gender-diverse professionals in social, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) by helping them build networks and explore career opportunities. Delivered virtually over 12 months, the program included bimonthly sessions that occurred two times a month organized by WCT and its public and private sector partners. Each cohort was limited to 20 participants. While the program successfully expanded and diversified participants' networks, evaluation feedback highlighted the need for clearer outcomes, a more structured curriculum, and expanded cohort sizes to improve reach and impact. These insights were instrumental in shaping the Opening Doors program.

The Opening Doors program had a broader scope, aiming to achieve greater impact by targeting women across the digital economy rather than focusing solely on STEM. The program's objectives were more narrowly defined and measurable, based on a clear competency framework that targeted four key areas:

- heightened level of social and self-awareness;
- improved essential skills;
- improved skills in articulating values and skills, and advocating for oneself and others;
- increased confidence and skills in dealing with difficult conversations and contributing to one's organization.

The Opening Doors program, which used a structured and scalable approach, was designed for women with at least one year of professional experience in the digital economy. Running from November 2023 through March 2024, it featured seven interactive workshops and a panel discussion, all conducted online. The program graduated 52 participants. Pre- and post-program surveys measured improvements in all four competency areas.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Fifty-two women and non-binary participants representing a wide range of sectors in the digital economy graduated from the program.
- 2 A key element of the program's design was the application of a competency framework focused on the specific skills leaders require to be effective.
- 3 By focusing on building individual capacities through mentorship and structured skill-building workshops, the program led to improvements across four major competency areas: 1) social and self-awareness, 2) essential skills, 3) articulating values and skills and advocating for self and others, and 4) confidence in dealing with difficult conversations and contributing to the organization.

► The Issue

The Opening Doors program was created to tackle the barriers contributing to women's underrepresentation in leadership roles within the digital economy, such as entrenched gender stereotypes, workplace biases, and a lack of mentorship and role models. Drawing from research and evaluation of previous initiatives, including the Roberta Bondar STEM Career Development Program, Opening Doors took an evidence-informed approach from the outset. The program's design included the development of a competency framework, ensuring a clear focus on the specific skills required for leadership and a structured method for tracking progress.



What We Investigated

The Opening Doors program ran from November 2023 to March 2024, during which a diverse group of 52 women and non-binary individuals successfully completed the program. These participants represented various sectors, including public administration; professional, scientific and technical fields; arts and entertainment; finance; insurance; administrative support; utilities; information and culture; management; and manufacturing.

The curriculum encompassed a wide range of topics critical for leadership development. Participants engaged in modules on self-promotion, personal branding, career planning, selling ideas, negotiation skills, emotional intelligence and managing difficult conversations. Each module was carefully designed to provide foundational leadership skills and enhance professional relationship management. The sessions provided practical, actionable resources that participants could immediately apply in real-world situations, ensuring that the knowledge gained would have a lasting impact and continue to support their career growth over time.

To promote sustained mentorship, all graduates were invited to join WCT's group mentorship program, known as Pods, upon completing the Opening Doors program. This additional opportunity was designed to extend the benefits of the initial program, providing continuous support and valuable networking.

By focusing on building individual capacities through mentorship and structured skill-building workshops, the program aimed to directly support women to navigate and succeed in environments in which they are underrepresented. An evaluation of its short-term outcomes was conducted using pre- and post-program surveys. These surveys aimed to measure changes in participants' competencies and skill development in four key areas:

- social and self-awareness (consisting of seven distinct skills);
- essential skills (10 skills);
- confidence in dealing with difficult conversations and contributing to the organization (eight skills);
- articulating values and skills and advocating for self and others (nine skills).

✓ What We're Learning

The results from the pre- and post-program surveys indicated varying degrees of improvement across the four major competencies assessed. It's important to note that some respondents completed only one survey, and this may discrepancy may affect the overall analysis and should be considered when evaluating the outcomes.

For social and self-awareness, survey results show that there was a modest overall increase of 0.05 points. Essential skills demonstrated a slight improvement, with an average increase of 0.22 points. Confidence in dealing with difficult conversations and contributing to the organization saw a gain of 0.33 points, while the ability to articulate values and skills and advocate for oneself and others improved by 0.30 points.

However, more substantial progress was observed among the 15 participants who completed both the pre- and post-program surveys. This group exhibited significant growth in social and self-awareness (0.61 points), essential skills (0.73 points), confidence in handling difficult conversations and contributing to the organization (0.90 points), and articulating values and skills and advocating for oneself and others (0.97 points).

A limitation is that the sample was small and the survey data was based on participants' self-assessments. While self-reported data can provide valuable insights, it may not fully capture actual skill development. Notably, the program may prompt participants who initially rated their skills highly to reassess their abilities when confronted with new information. Consequently, reported decreases in confidence may not reflect a lack of progress but rather an increased awareness of areas for improvement.

Based on the program evaluation, several recommendations have been identified to enhance the effectiveness and reach of future program iterations:

- **Recruitment and engagement strategies:** Extend the recruitment period, strengthen partnerships, secure employer commitments, leverage diverse recruitment channels and apply more targeted inclusion criteria.
- **Program onboarding and support:** Implement a comprehensive orientation process, provide ongoing technical support and develop a participant handbook to keep participants organized and informed.
- **Small-group networking opportunities:** Organize additional small-group networking events to foster broader connections and facilitate better engagement of working groups through more flexible strategies and external incentives that incorporate gamification.
- **Evaluation processes and methods:** Improve survey response rates by allocating time for program evaluation during training sessions and offering incentives for completion that do not bias

responses. Additionally, consider incorporating qualitative data collection methods for a more in-depth analysis.

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- **Program content:** In social and self-awareness, where evaluation results indicated the smallest positive change, modify the curriculum to target specific skills.

★ Why It Matters

The Opening Doors program provides valuable insights for developing initiatives that support women across various sectors. By focusing on nurturing a pipeline, the program ensures women are not only entering the digital economy but are also equipped with the skills, confidence and opportunities to advance to leadership positions. The curriculum is comprehensive, targeting areas where women often face challenges. Emphasizing social and self-awareness helps participants better understand themselves and others, laying the groundwork for strong relationships and effective management. The program also builds participants' confidence in handling difficult conversations, thus equipping women with the tools to manage conflicts and assert themselves, particularly in environments where they may not feel welcomed or where their abilities are questioned. Additionally, the focus on articulating values and advocating for oneself and others enables women to effectively communicate their contributions and drive positive change within their teams. The strategies and principles of the Opening Doors program are adaptable across various fields and sectors, offering a blueprint for supporting women in leadership roles.

Further, the program highlights the critical role of competency frameworks in training and development, offering a systematic approach to aligning individual skills with the specific needs of the organization. By clearly defining the competencies required for success, these frameworks ensure that training is not only focused and relevant but also tailored to address the actual demands of the workplace. Furthermore, competency frameworks facilitate ongoing assessment and tracking of progress, enabling organizations to identify skill gaps and make informed decisions about future training needs.



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How to Cite This Report

The Diversity Institute (2024). Project Insights Report: Developing women leaders in the digital economy, The Diversity Institute and Women in Communications and Technology. Toronto: Future Skills Centre. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/projects/developing-women-leaders/>

Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program



Developing Women Leaders in the Digital Economy is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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