

Newcomer  
Entrepreneur Program  
Phase 2 – Level Up  
Report for FSC



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# Executive Summary

The Newcomers Entrepreneurship Program (NEP) Phase 2, developed by DMZ at Toronto Metropolitan University, successfully expanded upon the foundational achievements of its pilot phase to offer a more in-depth entrepreneurial and career development experience for newcomers to Canada. Phase 2, titled “Level Up”, was supported by a grant from the Government of Canada’s Future Skills Centre (FSC) and evaluated by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC). The program’s objectives were to deepen the entrepreneurial and labour market skills of participants through training, expanded networking opportunities, and comprehensive mentorship—ultimately enhancing their integration into Canada’s startup ecosystem.

Throughout its duration from April to September 2024, NEP Phase 2 served 43 participants, delivering tailored workshops, expert-led courses, and immersive networking experiences that were pivotal in their entrepreneurial journeys. Key components such as DMZ SkillHouse, Live Actor Simulations, and exclusive events like the Collision Conference exemplified the program’s commitment to providing practical, actionable insights that participants could immediately leverage in their ventures. The program culminated with an assessment of participation and satisfaction, indicating a high level of participant engagement and a positive reception of the learning and networking opportunities provided.

## Introduction

### Background Information on the NEP & Objectives of Phase 2

The Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program (NEP) has been designed by DMZ to equip newcomers to Canada with critical entrepreneurial skills—facilitating their integration into the country’s startup ecosystem and small business sectors. Following the completion of its successful inaugural phase, which focused on foundational skills and initial community integration, NEP entered Phase 2, titled “Level Up”. This phase aimed to build on the solid groundwork from the initial offerings, advancing the program by deepening the entrepreneurial and labour market skills for its participants.

NEP Phase 1 laid the foundation by introducing participants to the Canadian tech ecosystem, providing basic entrepreneurship training, and facilitating initial networking opportunities. Participants attended workshops such as “Introduction to the Canadian Tech Ecosystem” and “Entrepreneurship 101”, which were instrumental in helping them understand and navigate the startup landscape in Canada. Phase 1 was marked by community-building efforts and featured insightful DMZ Alumni Founder Talks—where former newcomers shared their entrepreneurial journeys, offering both inspiration and practical advice to program participants.

Building upon these successes, Phase 2 was developed with the objective of enhancing the career trajectory of participants through more rigorous entrepreneurship training, targeted skill

development, and access to exclusive networking opportunities. As such, Phase 2 was structured around intensive skills training courses, expert mentoring, a significant increase in networking opportunities, and crucial community integration activities. This phase not only aimed to support newcomers in launching their startups but also enhanced their overall labour market skills—covering critical areas such as Productization, Sales, Professional Communication, and more.

## Overview of Funding and Support Structures

NEP Phase 2 has been generously supported by a grant of \$195,000 from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Centre (FSC). This funding has been pivotal in expanding the scope of the program to include more specialized training sessions, expert-led workshops, and expansive networking events. The investment by FSC underscores a deep mutual commitment to supporting economic integration and enhancing the entrepreneurial capabilities of newcomers through innovative skills development initiatives.

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) has been engaged as a third-party evaluator to rigorously assess the program outcomes. Using a comprehensive logic model developed for this purpose, SRDC's evaluation focuses on quantifying the impact of the training provided, measuring the effectiveness of networking activities, assessing the integration of participants into the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and evaluating overall participant satisfaction with the program.

## Scope and Purpose of the Final Report

This final report acts as a document that encapsulates the range of activities and outcomes of the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program. It will cover details on the following areas:

- **Evaluation and Documentation:** It provides a thorough examination and detailed account of the program's activities, processes, and outcomes. By doing so, the report illustrated the effectiveness and impact of the initiative—capturing both the successes and areas where expectations may not have been fully met.
- **Knowledge Mobilization and Reporting:** The insights, successes, and challenges encountered during the program are compiled and shared in this report. This knowledge mobilization aims to inform stakeholders—including funders, policymakers, and the public—about the program's tangible impacts and the lessons learned, facilitating a transparent understanding of its value and efficacy.
- **Guidance for Future Initiatives:** Incorporating feedback from participants and insights gained from the evaluation conducted by the SRDC, this report provides actionable recommendations. These suggestions are intended to refine future iterations of the NEP, ensuring the program remains responsive to the needs of newcomers and continues to improve in structure and content.

# Program Description

NEP has been tailored to foster the entrepreneurial and career ambitions of newcomers in Canada at DMZ. This section outlines the key components of NEP Phase 2, which ran from April 1, 2024 to September 30, 2024: (1) Skill-Building Opportunities, (2) Networking Opportunities, and (3) Mentorship and Support Structures.

## 1. Skill-Building Opportunities

### DMZ SkillHouse

Launched as a core initiative under DMZ's Talent Academy, SkillHouse offered a robust suite of specialized, expert-led courses tailored to empower entrepreneurs with critical business skills. This program was designed to address key areas vital for the growth and development of businesses, particularly for startups aiming to scale in competitive markets. Each course within SkillHouse was crafted to deliver practical, actionable insights that participants can immediately apply to their ventures.

- **Customer Success:** Focused on building and maintaining customer relationships, which are crucial to achieving sustainability for startups.
- **Professional Communications:** Aimed at enhancing participants' communication skills, both within their teams and with external stakeholders.
- **Productization:** Provided key techniques for product development, from conceptualization to market-ready offerings.
- **Sales Training:** Offered insights into the fundamentals of building effective sales strategies and customer acquisition.

### DMZ YYZ

DMZ YYZ served as a pivotal component of NEP, specifically designed to assist international growth-stage startups in exploring and establishing their business within the North American market. This program element offered a two-week intensive “soft landing” experience tailored to the unique challenges faced by international entrepreneurs.

The workshops provided by DMZ YYZ covered a range of topics that are crucial for successfully expanding a business into North America—including sessions on the market landscape, competitive analysis, business model validation, and strategic expansion techniques.

### DMZ Basecamp

A significant component of the skill-building efforts for NEP included comprehensive access to DMZ's Basecamp workshops. Recognizing the diverse schedules and needs of newcomers, the program ensured that all participants could attend these workshops virtually; thereby accommodating participants who might face geographical or time-related constraints.

The inclusion of the virtual attendance options for the Basecamp workshops allowed newcomers to participate actively in live sessions from anywhere. This flexibility was crucial in ensuring that all participants had equal opportunity to engage with the content and interact with the presenters and other attendees in real time, fostering an inclusive learning environment. Understanding the importance of continuous learning, the program provided access to recorded versions of each workshop. This resource proved to be valuable for participants who also wished to revisit the workshops for deeper understanding.

These Basecamp workshops covered a wide range of topics, from foundational business principles to more advanced entrepreneurial strategies—ensuring that participants could reinforce their learning and apply these key industry insights at their own pace.

## Live Actor Simulation

As part of the NEP program, a distinctive Live Actor Simulation titled “Pitching for Success” was conducted. This interactive exercise involved participants engaging in role-play scenarios with actors simulating potential investors, partners, and customers to refine their pitching and networking skills.

This simulation activity was designed to mimic real-world interactions, allowing participants to practice key interpersonal skills such as making introductions, engaging in small talk, and delivering business pitches in a networking event context. Immediate feedback from the actors—who maintained their roles throughout the simulation—provided participants with valuable insights into enhancing their communication strategies. This helped prepare them for real-life scenarios and professional meetings by boosting their confidence in a risk-free environment.

## Career-Readiness

As part of NEP, a series of virtual workshops were designed to bolster the professional development and career-readiness skills crucial for thriving in the Canadian job market. These workshops focused on resume building, interview preparedness, and effective networking through LinkedIn—equipping participants with the tools needed to enhance their employability and professional presence. These workshops were interactive, featuring breakout sessions where participants could directly apply lessons and swiftly receive feedback.

By the end of these sessions, participants enhanced their job application tools and also gained confidence in their ability to network effectively and navigate the professional landscape in Canada. This comprehensive approach to professional development was instrumental in ensuring that participants were well-prepared to pursue their career goals.

## 2. Networking Opportunities

Networking was embedded as a core element of the program, designed to integrate participants into the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem and connect them with potential mentors, partners,

investors, co-founders, customers, and beyond. The following networking opportunities were included as elements of the program, inviting participants to foster connections and engage with the Canadian startup ecosystem.

## Collision Conference

The Collision Conference in Toronto offered a pivotal platform for participants to immerse themselves in the dynamic world of global tech. This dynamic event—known as North America’s largest tech conference—provided unparalleled opportunities for networking, allowing participants to connect with a diverse array of industry professionals, potential investors, and peers. During the conference, participants explored a wide variety of high-demand industries, gaining insights into emerging trends and technological innovations.

A highlight of the program’s involvement in the Collision Conference was the “Breaking In: A Newcomer’s Guide to Startup Success” panel, hosted on the DMZ stage. This special segment showcased the unique perspectives and entrepreneurial journeys of several of the program participants. The panel not only gave them a chance to share their experiences with a wider audience, but also significantly elevated their visibility within the tech community. The exposure from this event was instrumental in opening doors for further opportunities and collaborations—demonstrating the program’s commitment to integrating newcomers into Canada’s vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem.

## DMZ Insider’s Event

DMZ Insider’s Event presented an exclusive platform for the Newcomer Program participants to engage directly with Canadian leaders at the forefront of technological innovation and investment. This prestigious event featured DMZ’s top startup founders pitching live on stage, competing for investment opportunities. This event showcased a demonstration of entrepreneurial talent and presented a critical networking opportunity for those looking to break into the tech industry. The newcomers had the opportunity to observe high-caliber pitches, understand the investment landscape, and network with some of the most influential figures in the Canadian tech industry.

## Friday Harbour Gathering

The DMZ Friday Harbour Networking event celebrated the successful collaboration between DMZ and the Town of Innisfil, showcasing the achievements and economic impact of DMZ Innisfil founders, including job creation and other key economic achievements.

For newcomers participating in NEP, this event was an opportunity to engage directly with seasoned DMZ and Innisfil founders, government officials, and community partners. These interactions provided newcomers with invaluable networking opportunities, allowing them to connect with key figures in the industry and explore new potential collaborations. The exposure to real-world entrepreneurial successes and the economic data during the event also served as an educational tool, helping them understand the critical elements that contribute to successful business ventures.

## Asia-Pacific Night

DMZ Asia-Pacific Night provided an exceptional networking opportunity, fostering connections between innovative startups and key stakeholders and investors from the Asia-Pacific region. Attendees had the chance to learn about new potential avenues of business expansion, and engage directly with corporations and international partners interested in forging meaningful collaborations. This event highlighted the importance of global connectivity and the potential for future market exploration.

## Industry Speed-Networking Event

The Industry Speed-Networking Event provided an opportunity for participants to engage directly with representatives from leading companies across various sectors. This event featured representatives from four prominent companies—SOTI, FDM Group, PORCH, and Prepdactors—which each brought a unique perspective to the table.

The format of this event allowed for quick, focused conversations between participants and company representatives, enabling efficient and effective networking. Participants practiced their elevator pitches and learned how to quickly articulate their value proposition in a professional context. This event also fostered a strong cultural exchange, with company representatives gaining insights into the diverse backgrounds and experiences that newcomers bring to Canada. This mutual learning experience enriched the dialogue, making the networking event a profound learning experience for both sides.

## Demo Days

Participation in DMZ Basecamp and Italia360 Demo Days offered NEP participants an invaluable learning opportunity, witnessing successful pitches from program finalists. They could see firsthand how clarity of communication, confidence, and the ability to articulate a business value proposition impacted the audience and the judges. These Demo Days were heavily attended, creating an energetic atmosphere where newcomers could engage directly with influential figures within the startup ecosystem. The presence of various stakeholders—ranging from potential investors and industry experts to fellow entrepreneurs—provided a fertile ground for networking. Participants had the opportunity to connect with potential mentors and collaborators who could play pivotal roles in their entrepreneurial journeys.

## Co-Working Space

Throughout the program, participants were given access to DMZ's co-working spaces, which provided a dynamic and supportive environment conducive to networking, collaboration, and business development. This core space served as a hub for creativity and interaction, allowing participants to immerse themselves fully within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

### 3. Mentorship and Support Structures

DMZ's NEP program incorporated a comprehensive mentorship framework—designed to ensure that participants receive tailored, ongoing support throughout their entrepreneurship journey. This structured mentorship was pivotal in nurturing participants' business acumen and leadership skills, providing them with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of starting and scaling a business in Canada.

**Bi-Weekly Meetings with a Program Mentor:** Each participant was assigned a dedicated DMZ Program Mentor. These mentors are seasoned entrepreneurs or business experts who provide critical feedback tailored to the unique needs and developmental stages of the participants' businesses. The bi-weekly meeting schedule ensures consistent, timely support—allowing participants to discuss their progress, address emerging challenges, and refine their strategies in a responsive manner. Participants were encouraged to schedule additional meetings as needed, requesting support at the most critical moments of their business journey.

The two core mentors who were chosen for NEP Phase 2 are:

- **Sara Taghavi Motlagh:** Sara is a Computer Engineer with a Master's Degree in IT Knowledge Management and IT Strategic Management. She moved to Canada in 2021 to pursue a PhD in Machine Learning Network Optimization at Ontario Tech University. She focuses on helping large telecommunications networks prevent failures similar to the Rogers network failure in 2022. She is a mentor to startups on problem validation, solution ideation, and product development. Sara has worked with over 60 different startups and capstone groups, helping them identify innovative components of product development and apply for funding under SR&ED. She also works for a non-profit organization, Pamoja Institute, where she leverages technology to help them solve systemic challenges in the Black community.
- **Mentor Tolu Fawole:** Tolu Owolabi is a seasoned professional with experience that spans across auditing, financial reporting, budgeting, grants administration, and program management. She is the Grants & Program Development Manager at Afro Canadian Contractor's Association and has previously held roles at FATE Foundation & KPMG. Tolu is passionate about supporting racialized entrepreneurs in Canada through active coaching and mentorship support.

**Experts-in-Residence (EiRs):** The program also offered access to DMZ's EiRs, who bring specialized knowledge across a broad spectrum of business areas. This access allowed participants to delve deeper into specific challenges and opportunities within their ventures. The EiRs provide advice and insights in several key areas, including but not limited to: streamlining processes and increasing efficiency, budgeting, financial forecasting, funding strategies, developing and implementing sales strategies that drive growth, long-term business planning to ensure sustainability and scalability, and more.

EiRs were available to NEP participants for scheduled consultations, offering advice that was both strategic and practical. Their guidance was crucial for participants looking to overcome obstacles and capitalize on opportunities within their specific business contexts, especially within the Canadian business landscape.

DMZ tapped into the expertise of a wide range of EiRs for NEP Phase 2, including:

- **Melissa Malcolm** has an HR career spanning over 20 years in both the public and private sector. She has extensive hands-on experience leading HR initiatives—including HR planning and strategy, organizational design, recruitment, onboarding, employee relations, and talent management.
- **Christian Grunt** has extensive investment management, technology and governance experience. He is currently a Principal with ScaleUP Ventures, one of Canada's leading venture capital funds, with over \$150MM assets under management committed from some of Canada's largest enterprises and institutional investors.
- **Mira Soullen** is a full-stack digital marketer with 14 years of experience in tech. She specializes in a broad scope of digital marketing, brand building, and lead generation—applying a pragmatic, data-driven approach to business strategy. Mira is a Chief Marketing Officer, Educator and Growth Advisor to more than 10 startups.
- **Michael Low** brings a blend of strategic general management skills and experience with a focus on business development and sales, sales process, procurement strategy and operations. He has over 25 years' experience in IT Professional services and founded a company that generated over \$25m in revenue.
- **Sultan Mehrabi** co-founded Zensurance, a pure play insurance technology startup in the commercial insurance space. He was also previously Head of Strategy at Kijiji, Canada's largest consumer to consumer classifieds marketplace, where he worked closely with the executive team on developing annual and long-term strategic plans.
- **Nathan Prescott** has strong expertise in mentorship, spanning from new product concepts and scalable marketing strategies, to advanced challenges like developing growth techniques and enhancing revenue growth. As a founder, he successfully built an enterprise SEO agency, growing its team to 30 before making a strategic exit.
- **Javed Maqsood** is a growth-focused executive with 20+ years of experience in Silicon Valley, building and leading best-in-class growth and post-sales strategy. He provides operational support and advisory services to startups, helping companies succeed with the right growth and post-sales strategies.

# Timeline of Program Implementation

The NEP implemented a comprehensive timeline to ensure the strategic roll-out of its diverse components, aiming to maximize participant development and program outcomes. The timeline spans from its start in April 2024 to its end in September 2024, with specific activities designed to build skills, enhance networks, and mobilize knowledge effectively.

## **April – May 2024**

- Initial skills and professional profile assessments were conducted to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each participant, guiding personalized development plans.

## **May – September 2024**

- Implementation of curated programming trajectories for each participant, which included:
  - DMZ skill-development workshops
  - Career-readiness seminars
  - Tailored coaching and mentorship
  - Talent Academy / SkillHouse Courses

## **June 2024**

- DMZ YYZ week: a concentrated series of events and workshops aimed at integrating international startups into the North American market
- DMZ Insider's Event, coinciding with Collision Week
- Participation in the Collision Conference and the Collision Newcomer's Panel
- Newcomers' Networking Events such as Friday Harbour, Founder Socials, and more

## **July – Aug 2024**

- Continued support for startup growth and development through one-on-one Program Mentor meetings and DMZ EiR support
- Participant participation in DMZ SkillHouse Courses and Basecamp skill-development workshops
- DMZ Demo Day event participation for Basecamp and Italia360 programs
- Continuous access to DMZ Co-Working spaces for ecosystem integration

## **September 2024**

- Completion of all planned activities and finalization of the knowledge mobilization report—summarizing the insights, outcomes, and future recommendations for the program
- Collection and integration of participant and expert feedback
- Finalizing work with the third-party evaluator to track program outcomes

# Case Study: Navigating New Beginnings and Pioneering Innovation

**Participant Background:** Serhii Tenkov, originally from Ukraine, embarked on an unexpected journey to Canada two years ago due to the escalating conflict in his homeland. Initially struggling with limited English proficiency, Serhii dedicated himself to mastering the language to better integrate and communicate with his new environment. With a rich background as a sales manager, director, and eventually CEO in Ukraine—where he launched and managed his own business—he came to Canada looking to replicate his entrepreneurial success. His first venture in Canada was a startup launched at a challenging time, as the war began in Ukraine in January 2022. After some months of adjustment, he discovered NEP at DMZ, which he felt was perfectly timed to help restart his entrepreneurial activities in North America.

**Business Endeavour:** Serhii operates two businesses: one in Ukraine focused on installing security systems, and a startup in Canada aimed at helping small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) collect and leverage customer feedback effectively. Initially focused on basic feedback collection, his participation in NEP led him to pivot towards a more robust model that incorporated user-generated content into business strategies, recognizing its increasing importance in digital marketing.

**Experience in the Program:** Serhii found the DMZ NEP program exceptionally professional, highlighting the stark contrast with his prior experiences in similar programs in Ukraine. He noted that every aspect of the program—from pitch sessions to networking events like Collision and comprehensive workshop sessions—was meticulously organized and delivered. The program's atmosphere and the opportunities it provided were pivotal, helping him reshape his business approach for the North American market.

**Challenges and Resilience:** Transitioning his business amid global upheaval presented significant challenges. However, the structured support from DMZ—including Sales Development Representative training and mentorship from DMZ's Experts-in-Residence—provided him with the tools to refine his business model and strategy. These interactions helped him identify essential changes and integrate new features into his business, preparing him for a relaunch in the competitive North American landscape.

**Skills and Professional Development:** A key area of development for Serhii was enhancing his communication skills, which was crucial given his background and the new market dynamics. Participation in activities like live actor simulations were particularly beneficial, helping him overcome communication barriers and improving his ability to articulate his business vision effectively. These improvements in key soft skills have been fundamental to his professional growth in Canada, influencing his approach to business and customer interactions.

**Outcomes and Achievements:** A significant milestone for Serhii has been preparing to launch the North American version of his startup, scheduled for October or November of 2024. This

launch is not just a testament to his resilience, but also a clear indicator of the practical impact of the DMZ program on his entrepreneurial journey.

**Looking Ahead:** For the upcoming year, Serhii's goals are centred around successfully launching his MVP in North America, continuing to refine his business model, and potentially exploring the integration of AI to enhance his service offerings.

**Final Thoughts:** Serhii's journey through NEP has been transformative—equipping him with not just business skills, but also a profound confidence in navigating the entrepreneurial landscape of North America. He expresses deep gratitude for the support and insights gained, emphasizing that the program has positioned him for success in a highly competitive market.

This case study exemplifies the profound impact that targeted support and structured programming can have on newcomers looking to translate their entrepreneurial ambitions into tangible business successes in a new market.

## Methodology & Program Evaluation

### Participant Satisfaction

The evaluation of participant satisfaction within NEP was conducted to assess the impact and effectiveness of the program. The methodology included a comprehensive survey distributed to all participants, focusing on several key aspects of their experience. This section delves into the statistics on overall participant satisfaction, their perceived utility of the program, and their likelihood of recommending the program to others.

#### Statistics on Overall Participant Satisfaction

The post-program survey revealed high levels of satisfaction among participants, with over 85% reporting they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the program. The high satisfaction rate is indicative of the program's effectiveness in meeting the needs and expectations of newcomers, providing them with valuable skills and networking opportunities for their entrepreneurial journey.

#### Participants' Perceived Utility of the Program

The participants expressed strong positive feedback on the utility of the program, highlighting several areas where the program had significantly impacted their professional development. Key areas mentioned included enhanced understanding of the North American business environment, improved business and communication skills, and increased confidence in pitching and networking. The practical Career-Readiness workshops on resume building, interview preparedness, and LinkedIn networking were particularly valued for their direct applicability to the participants' career progression. The overall responses indicated that over 90% of participants found NEP to be highly useful—particularly highlighting the practical application of

skills in real-world scenarios, and the value of networking events in expanding their professional connections.

## Likelihood of Recommending the Program to Others

The likelihood of participants recommending NEP to other newcomers was overwhelmingly positive, with more than 90% indicating they would likely recommend it. This metric not only underscores the program's success in delivering value, but also reflects its reputation within the community as a beneficial initiative for newcomers aiming to integrate into the Canadian economy.

## Measured Gains in Specific Skills Acquired

Participants evaluated their skill enhancements in areas such as professional communication, sales, financial management, business planning, digital skills, leadership, and critical thinking. The participant feedback highlighted substantial improvements in these areas, with notable gains in communications and sales being the most frequently mentioned. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the skill-building courses and workshops, as well as the program's ability to meet its objective of bolstering entrepreneurial capabilities.

The data gathered from these evaluations form a critical part of the program's continuous improvement process, ensuring that each iteration is responsive to the needs and experiences of its participants. Overall, the findings from this comprehensive survey highlight the program's success in equipping newcomers with the necessary tools and knowledge to thrive in Canada's entrepreneurial landscape.

Some highlights of participants' self-assessed skill development include:

- 10% experienced a complete transformation of their digital skills
- 10% experienced a complete transformation of their sales skills
- 10% experienced a complete transformation of their financial management skills
- 50% experienced significant improvement in their professional communications skills
- 30% experienced significant improvement in their leadership and management skills

## Quantitative Data on Participant Participation

To assess the impact and reach of NEP, the following quantitative data was measured to gauge participant engagement across various program components. The following section provides a breakdown of the participation:

- **Total number of program participants:** NEP successfully engaged 43 participants, each undergoing a series of tailored workshops, mentorship sessions, and networking events designed to enhance their entrepreneurial journey.
- **EiR meetings:** There were 10 EiR meetings conducted, offering specialized advice in key business areas to provide actionable strategic insights to the participants.
- **Program Mentor Meetings:** A total of 49 mentorship meetings were held, emphasizing the program's commitment to providing personalized guidance and support.

- **Talent Academy/SkillHouse Participation:** 28 participants took part in these courses, benefiting from expert-led courses focused on building essential business and entrepreneurship skills.
- **Founder’s Dinner Attendance:** This exclusive event had 25 NEP participants networking with established entrepreneurs and industry leaders, fostering significant professional connections.
- **Collision Conference Attendance:** 28 participants attended this major tech conference, gaining exposure to broader industry trends and networking opportunities.
- **Demo Day Attendance:** A high turnout of 86% of NEP participants at our Demo Day events indicated a significant interest in learning about other startups and networking with high-profile and influential ecosystem builders.
- **Participation in Career Building Workshops:** The career-focused workshops saw an average participation rate of 37%, indicating a steady interest in developing job-related skills.
- **Participation in YYZ Workshops:** The YYZ workshops, aimed at facilitating market entry into North America, had an average participation rate of 40%
- **Participation in Basecamp Workshops:** These foundational workshops saw a live participation rate of 26%. It should be noted, however, that these virtual workshops were recorded and distributed among participants for later viewing—enabling newcomers to review the workshop content and material on their own time, for those unable to attend in person.
- **Usage of Co-Working Spaces:** 23 participants utilized the co-working spaces provided by DMZ, demonstrating the value of a physical space for collaboration and networking

## Qualitative Data and Insights from Feedback

The qualitative feedback received from participants provides deeper insights into the efficacy of the program and areas for improvement:

- **Feedback on EiR and Mentor Sessions:** Participants praised the EiR and mentorship sessions for their relevance and the actionable advice provided. Mentors were commended for their approachability and deep industry knowledge
- **Responses to Talent Academy/SkillHouse Courses:** The courses were well-received, with participants appreciating the practical and in-depth skills they learned. Some feedback suggested a larger variety of topics and more advanced topics to be covered.
- **Experience at Networking Events:** Feedback from events like Collision and the Founder’s Dinner was overwhelmingly positive, with participants valuing direct access to seasoned entrepreneurs and investors.
- **Engagement in Workshops:** Participants found the majority of the workshop information valuable; however, some expressed a need for more interactive elements to increase engagement and retention of the material.
- **Utilization of Co-Working Spaces:** Those who used the co-working spaces highlighted the benefit of having a dedicated, professional environment for work and meetings.

Suggestions for improvement included extending access hours beyond DMZ's regular operating hours, which currently is from Monday to Friday, from 9am to 5pm.

## Program Mentor Feedback

The mentorship component of NEP has provided valuable insights into the effectiveness and areas for improvement of the program. Feedback from two experienced mentors offers a comprehensive view of the mentoring experience, program structure, and participant transformations, alongside targeted suggestions for enhancing future iterations of the program.

### Mentoring Experience and Effectiveness

Both mentors rated their experience positively, with an average rating of 80%. Both mentors highlighted the initial engagement, as well as specific program elements like the SkillHouse courses and the workshops, as particularly effective. Other components noted as highly impactful included the availability of recordings and tools such as the live-acting simulation, which greatly benefited the participants by allowing continuous practice and review. One mentor emphasized how the excitement around attending the Collision conference was excellent for sparking enthusiastic engagement from NEP participants.

### Mentor Feedback on Program Structure

- There were sufficient resources and support for mentors, which facilitated effective mentoring.
- There is a need for more tools to keep participants accountable and guide their progress—suggesting that the program could benefit from providing mentors with more authority and resources to enforce engagement and track progress.
- Participants could benefit from some more structured elements to the program.
- DMZ could find ways to incentivize mentees to engage more actively with mentors through discrete goals, such as preparing for a pitch competition or developing a strategic plan for a grant.
- The program could be more personalized through a structured guide or checklist tailored to various stages of startup development.

### Impact and Transformations

The mentors successfully linked mentees with resources and subject-matter experts, provided crucial feedback on business strategies, and served as accountability partners. This support helped participants to refine their business approach and prepare for significant opportunities like Collision, or even more advanced DMZ programs such as the Pre-Incubator or Incubator cohorts.

Both mentors observed significant transformations overall in their mentees. Some areas of improvement included increased confidence and improved strategic approaches—particularly for those newcomers who regularly engaged with the program. One mentor noted varying levels

of commitment among the program participants, which highlights the need for clearer intention assessment at the start of the program.

## Challenges and Recommendations

NEP provided invaluable learning experiences for all participants—not only for the newcomers, but also for the program coordinators and mentors. Throughout the program’s implementation, some challenges were encountered and critical lessons were learned that will inform future iterations of the program.

### Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned

NEP aims to integrate newcomer entrepreneurs into Canada’s business ecosystem, which is a complex task that presents unique challenges. The variability in participants’ backgrounds and general availability means that a one-size-fits-all approach becomes less effective. Which is why DMZ tailored the curriculum to meet individual needs, which proved crucial to the program’s success—as generic content did not sufficiently address the specific barriers faced by newcomers from different cultural and professional backgrounds.

Another challenge was maintaining consistent engagement throughout the program, especially following high-energy events such as the Collision Conference. The tangible drop in post-event engagement indicated the need for more sustained motivational strategies and follow-up activities to maintain the program’s momentum.

One of the key lessons learned was the importance of flexibility in program design. The dynamic nature of the participants’ needs required a responsive approach that could adapt to evolving challenges and opportunities. Additionally, the program highlighted the importance of building strong peer-support networks among participants, which proved just as important and valuable as formal mentorship connections. The strong peer support helped to mitigate feelings of isolation and built a community that enhanced the learning experience for newcomers.

Overall, the reflections from the project indicated that while structured, hands-on workshops and networking opportunities were highly effective and beneficial, there needs to be an emphasis on personalization and ongoing support mechanisms. The feedback from participants and mentors alike suggested that even more tailored content, coupled with flexible learning opportunities, could continue to enhance the effectiveness of learning outcomes and the program as a whole.

## Recommendations for Future Programs

Based on the comprehensive feedback and the assessments gathered, several recommendations can be made to improve future iterations of NEP:

1. **Additional personalization of learning opportunities:** By continuing to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach and toward a more tailored educational experience, NEP can significantly enhance the individual development and growth of the participants. To achieve this, the program could implement more comprehensive initial assessments to capture detailed insights into each participant's specific needs, aspirations, and challenges. This assessment would help in the creation of customized learning paths, where applicable, that align closely with each entrepreneur's journey—ensuring that every participant has the most optimal range of resources and support available to help with achieving their milestones.
2. **Continuous engagement strategy:** By implementing a structured engagement plan that includes regular check-ins and milestone celebrations throughout the program, newcomers would maintain motivation and continue active participation; particularly following high-energy events early in the program. By regularly recognizing achievements and providing ongoing support, we can prevent any drops in engagement—keeping participants fully involved from start to finish.
3. **Flexible learning options:** By continuing to offer hybrid learning options and flexibility when it comes to program participation, the program can cater to the varied personal and professional commitments of newcomers—ensuring that everyone, regardless of their schedule or location, has the opportunity to engage fully with the program's offerings. By maintaining this adaptability in the NEP schedule, founders can be provided with the ability to participate actively in a manner that best fits their existing lifestyle, without compromising any of their obligations.
4. **Continued post-program support and engagement:** To ensure sustained support and development for the participants of the program, it's crucial to extend the support mechanisms beyond the official program timeline. This can include ongoing mentorship opportunities, access to some continued co-working space, and invitations to exclusive ecosystem community events, workshops, networking opportunities, and more. These initiatives will provide the program alumni with the necessary guidance, professional environment for continued business activities, and opportunities for lifelong learning and professional growth.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the entirety of NEP Phase 2, the program stands out as a resounding success in equipping newcomers with the essential tools and networks needed to thrive in Canada's entrepreneurial landscape. The carefully structured components—from skill-building workshops and mentorship to the dynamic networking events—have fostered significant professional growth among participants, while also enhancing their integration into the broader startup and business community. The lessons learned from Phase 2, particularly the importance of

personalized learning approaches and continuous engagement strategies, will help to inform future iterations of the program, ensuring that it remains responsive to the evolving needs of newcomers.

We would like to acknowledge the Future Skills Centre for their key contributions and financial support, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation for their rigorous evaluation, and the numerous mentors and participants whose contributions were vital in delivering a transformative experience for all participants. The collective effort of these stakeholders highlights a shared commitment to supporting economic integration and fostering entrepreneurial success among newcomers—setting a benchmark for future initiatives in this vital area of community and economic development.