

Project Insights Report

Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program



PARTNERS

DMZ Startups



LOCATIONS

Ontario



INVESTMENT

\$495,000



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Executive Summary

In Canada, newcomers often face significant challenges integrating into the business ecosystem; a critical issue that impacts both individual livelihoods and the broader economic landscape. This difficulty primarily stems from a lack of local networks and unfamiliarity with the Canadian business environment. The integration challenges are compounded by the underutilization of skills and experiences that newcomers bring, representing a missed opportunity to strengthen the Canadian economy.

Efforts to support newcomer integration into Canada's business sector have not fully addressed the need for culturally aware, comprehensive training and accessible entrepreneurial networking opportunities. Programs have either been too generic, lacking in specific insights into navigating the Canadian business context, or not sufficiently tailored to address the diverse backgrounds of newcomers. This gap has left many newcomers without the necessary support to leverage their skills effectively and integrate into the job market.

The DMZ at Toronto Metropolitan University recognized these ongoing challenges and aimed to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for newcomer entrepreneurs. To provide this targeted support, they created the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program. This approach was informed by the broader context of Canada's innovation ecosystem, which thrives on diversity but has underleveraged the talents of its immigrant population.

KEY INSIGHTS

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A shift to a hybrid model with both online and in-person sessions enhanced engagement and networking opportunities for participants.

- 2 The program effectively addressed both personal and professional development needs of participants, which was crucial for their broader integration into Canadian society, transcending business success.
- 3 Early engagement challenges were mitigated by implementing a more targeted recruitment strategy and refining the curriculum to encourage more active participation.

► The Issue

Helping immigrants find jobs and settle into work in Canada is complex and requires many different efforts. Over the years, governments, employers, and policy-makers have created programs such as language training, credential bridging, and career services to support newcomers entering the job market. Despite these efforts, many still face challenges like complicated systems, discrimination, and difficulties accessing social and professional networks. Because of these barriers, some newcomers choose to start their own businesses instead of continuing to struggle within traditional career paths.

Even so, newcomers who want to become entrepreneurs often face other obstacles. Many don't have access to mentors who can guide them in developing business skills and building networks in Canada. Others lack the financial resources to get their business ideas off the ground or don't fully understand how to navigate the local business environment. These challenges make it harder for newcomers to succeed as entrepreneurs, even when they have a strong education and technical skills.



What We Investigated

The [DMZ](#) at Toronto Metropolitan University, a tech incubator and global startup ecosystem that helps founders build high-impact ventures, recognized these ongoing challenges and aimed to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for newcomer entrepreneurs.

To address these gaps, DMZ developed the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program to increase opportunities for newcomer entrepreneurs with under five years in Canada looking to develop a tech-based company. The objective of the program was to help newcomers build confidence, grow their networks, and understand the Canadian business ecosystem.

During Phase 1 of this project, from March to June 2023, DMZ participated in the Future Skill Centre's Incubation Network – a series of four convening sessions, bringing together representatives from seven institutions dedicated to advancing newcomer integration in Canada. The Network provided a forum for collective support to deal with project-level implementation challenges.

Alongside their participation in the network, DMZ developed an 8-week bootcamp that included access to workshops, one-on-one coaching, peer sessions, and the ability to come to the DMZ office to network with other participants. Participants attended workshops such as “Introduction to the Canadian Tech Ecosystem” and “Entrepreneurship 101”, and featured DMZ Alumni Founder Talks—where former newcomers shared their entrepreneurial journeys, offering both inspiration and practical advice to program participants. The majority of the offerings were virtual during Phase 1.

During Phase 2, from April to September 2024, DMZ offered more hybrid options based on feedback from the previous cohort and focused more on intensive skills training courses covering topics like customer success, productization, sales and professional communication via their [SkillHouse](#) (now called Skills Academy), [YYZ](#) and [Basecamp](#) programming. Phase 2 also included role-play scenarios on pitching for success and career readiness workshops focused on resume building, interview preparedness, and effective networking through LinkedIn. Participants were also offered additional networking and mentorship opportunities.

During both phases, each program participant chose the combination of activities to participate in based on their stage in their entrepreneurship journey.

In addition to the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program, this project involved an evaluation that explored program impact on the integration of participating newcomers to Canada. The evaluation included a review of administrative data, documents, a retrospective survey, key informant interviews and a photovoice effort that utilized participant photos and short narratives.

What We're Learning

During Phase 2, from June to September 2024, 43 newcomers participated in the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program.

Content with a dual purpose. Participants expressed greater enthusiasm for workshops that offered skills applicable to both their personal and professional lives. This dual focus helped address the broader challenges of integration for newcomers, who not only sought to establish businesses but also to navigate their new social and cultural environment in Canada. As illustrated in one powerful participant testimonial: *“My experience with the Newcomer Entrepreneur Program has been like standing at the edge of a new world, with mentors and peers providing the support to help me see beyond the barriers. Without their guidance, it would have been hard to fully understand the opportunities that lie ahead or how to navigate the complexities of the business landscape in a new country.”*

Effective participant engagement was challenging. The initial cohort experienced varying levels of commitment, which the organizers attributed to the virtual format and the diverse responsibilities of the participants, many of whom were balancing “survival jobs” and family obligations. To combat this, the second cohort featured a more targeted recruitment strategy and a refined curriculum designed to incentivize active participation. This approach included scheduling workshops during lunch hours and reducing the number of workshops from 20 to 14, allowing for deeper engagement with each topic.

Creation of community to build social capital. The program organized two major in-person networking events, which were spaced at the beginning and end of the program. These events were crucial in helping participants establish and strengthen their local networks, which is often a major hurdle for newcomers. The program also leveraged the experiences of DMZ alumni who were newcomers themselves, providing relatable role models and mentors for the participants. This not only enriched the learning experience but also helped participants see practical examples of successful integration into the Canadian business landscape.

★ Why It Matters

Newcomer entrepreneurs to Canada face a range of barriers to success. While practical entrepreneurial skills are essential to addressing these barriers, the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program underscores the critical role of networking in the successful integration of newcomers into the Canadian business ecosystem. The emphasis on networking in Phase 2 of the project highlights a potential gap in current newcomer integration policies, which often focus predominantly on skills and employment. This insight suggests that enhancing social capital and community connections could be as crucial as skills training. Policymakers might consider developing initiatives that specifically aim to build networks for newcomers, potentially increasing their overall success and integration into society.

The project’s ability to pivot based on participant feedback demonstrates the value of evaluation and adaptive program design in policy-making and organizational practice. Policies that incorporate mechanisms for regular feedback and program adjustment can potentially achieve higher effectiveness and beneficiary satisfaction.



State of Skills: What Works for Newcomer Integration

Despite the overall success of Canada’s immigration system, a number of challenges persist. When compared to other nations, labour market mobility for newcomers in Canada is not as strong as other dimensions of migrant integration.

► What's Next

While DMZ has not continued to develop programs specific to newcomers, they continue to offer an online, early-stage resource for people interested in entrepreneurship called [Launchpad for Entrepreneurs](#). This program allows anyone across the world to learn the fundamentals of starting a business and provides them with a community of like-minded individuals.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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