

# The Diversity Forum WINS

## Diversity is Strength

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## Inclusion Strategies to Better Engage Queer and Trans Immigrants and Refugees

By Colin Druhan, Executive Director, Pride at Work Canada, and [WINS Advisory Board Member](#)

Despite the many business benefits of engaging highly skilled newcomer talent pools, immigrant unemployment is a persistent issue in Canada. This challenge is particularly pronounced for those who are also members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities.

Currently, over sixty countries criminalize same-sex relationships and sexual behavior. Globally, there has been a sharp increase in activity to dehumanize and undermine the rights and security of people who are trans, nonbinary, agender or otherwise gender diverse. Canada is among fewer than forty countries that grant asylum based on fear of persecution because of one's sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Canada therefore bills itself as a beacon of inclusion. But many people come to Canada as refugees and asylum seekers to escape state-sponsored homophobic, transphobic or biphobic violence only to face intense discrimination in Canada's labour market.

An increasing number of employers now recognize the need to move beyond performative allyship toward measurable action on diversity, equity and inclusion. For their strategies to be meaningful employers must implement good practices for the inclusion of queer and trans immigrants and refugees. They must be intentional in their actions while understanding that this group, in and of itself, is incredibly diverse. So, while the potential levers are many, there are a few practices that have been broadly proven to get results for both employers and newcomers.

### Shift the focus to the needs of newcomers

Employers often leap to training and storytelling as a way of compelling more inclusive behavior from employees born in Canada. It's easy to understand why. Equity deserving groups often build unique strengths and skills through perseverance. Personal narratives can illustrate that well. While queer and trans immigrants and refugees often have powerful stories, there is no evidence that the practice of sharing them creates a culture of inclusion. In fact, it risks retraumatizing queer and trans newcomers and can unfairly stigmatize them as vulnerable. So, rather than leveraging the traumas of newcomer talent for an assumed benefit to Canadian-born workers, employers must centre the needs of newcomers in their strategies. The focus should be newcomers and not the curiosity of those around them. Queer and trans immigrants and refugees who are empowered to take leadership roles in the workplace may choose to share their stories on their own terms. But it should not be required.

### But what if the workplace has no newcomers?

If a workforce is not currently benefiting from the talents and skills of immigrants and refugees, it's important to identify any barriers that may be in place. Queer and trans newcomers can face specific and layered disadvantages in hiring processes. For example, applicants who are "outed" as queer through specific experience, such as volunteering with a Pride festival, are 25% less likely to get an interview. This presents specific barriers for refugees, many of whom are directed to make connections with and volunteer for 2SLGBTQIA+ community groups upon arrival to Canada. Many hiring managers refuse to consider immigrants and refugees of all genders and orientations for xenophobic reasons, like having an accent or lacking "Canadian experience". So, it is important for human resources professionals and hiring managers to be advised of how these biases leave out many qualified applicants. They should be aware that queer and trans newcomers also face racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination within queer communities and that some of the solutions they have implemented to support 2SLGBTQIA+ people may need to be re-examined.



## Ensure 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts are actually inclusive

Many workplace inclusion initiatives are developed in collaboration with 2SLGBTQIA+ team members. But due to the underrepresentation of queer and trans newcomers in many workplaces their voices are not always present. Even when they are in the work environment, they may speak but not actually be listened to due to bias. This is troubling because effective engagement with workplace activities has been proven to be an important measure when supporting the advancement of newcomer talent in the workplace. Unlike other newcomers, many queer and trans immigrants and refugees may lack connection to their extended families or broader diasporic communities. Also, many queer and trans newcomers cite comfort with being out in the workplace and not at home or with some or all family members. It is important for employee resource groups and diversity councils to address these and other granular issues through direct engagement with queer and trans newcomers so they can inform the employer's strategy. Having as diverse a group as possible at the planning table helps identify ways internal efforts can move forward without barriers to newcomers' involvement. Employee resource groups should take special care not to tokenize queer and trans immigrants and refugees by only engaging them on topics related to newcomers, thus reducing them to only one facet of their identities. Immigrants and refugees are multi-dimensional with lots of professional skills. They have great ideas for other things too!

## Work with immigrant and refugee organizations

Another way to empower queer and trans immigrants and refugees is to partner with initiatives that are led by newcomers themselves. Jumpstart Refugee Talent is a refugee-led Canadian nonprofit. Its [Welcome Talent Canada](#) program helps newly settled refugees “jump start” their professional careers in Canada by hand-matching them with Canadian professionals. The program supports refugees to overcome unique barriers in the labour market and allows Canadian employers access to an incredible pool of talent that is often, and unfairly, overlooked. [The Dignity Network](#) is a pan-Canadian network of organizations that supports and promotes the human rights of queer and trans people globally. Their International Advisory Group is composed of sixteen leaders from organizations around the world working on 2SLGBTQIA+ human rights issues. These are just two examples of the many organizations with events and resources that can deepen an organization's understanding of the various needs of queer and trans immigrants and refugees in Canada and abroad.

## Don't just take my word for it

This brief article compiles just a few ways employers can address barriers for queer and trans immigrants and refugees. But, as is true for any inclusion strategy, it is important to take guidance from a range of sources. I have the privilege of working with a diverse group of staff at Pride at Work Canada, half of whom were born outside of Canada. I learn from each of my colleagues every day. In fact, a few of them helped me write this article by sharing personal anecdotes as well as resources. But this proximity to newcomers in my work life does not make me an expert and it does not give me lived experience as an immigrant or refugee. Remember, the very best resources about equity-deserving groups are developed by or with members of the group being discussed.

I encourage you to explore some of the resources I drew from for this article. If you find other helpful sources, please [connect with me on LinkedIn to share them!](#)

### Resources

[Reports on Gender: The Law of Inclusion & Practices of Exclusion](#) by the United Nations Independent Expert On Protection Against Violence And Discrimination Based On Sexual Orientation And Gender Identity

[LGBTQIA+ Refugees and Asylum Seekers, A Review of Research and Data Needs](#) by Ari Shaw  
Namrata Verghese | UCLA School of Law Williams Institute

[Identity, Refugeeess, Belonging: Experience of Sexual Minority Refugees in Canada](#) by Edward Ou Jin Lee and Shari Brotman | McGill School of Social Work

[“Other” Troubles: Deconstructing Perceptions and Changing Responses to Refugees in Canada](#) by Christopher Olsen, Rowan El-Bialy, Mark McKelvie, Peggy Rauman and Fern Brunger

[SPEAK OUT! Structural Intersectionality and Anti-Oppressive Practice with LGBTQ Refugees in Canada](#) by Edward Ou Jin Lee and Shari Brotman | Canadian Social Work Review

[3 ways businesses can support LGBTQ refugees in the workplace](#) | World Economic Forum

[Serving LGBTQ Immigrants and Building Welcoming Communities](#) | The Center for American Progress

### Organizations

[Dignity Network Canada](#)

[Jumpstart - Refugee Talent](#)

[Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants](#)

[Rainbow Railroad](#)

[Rainbow Refugee](#)

[The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council \(TRIEC\)](#)



**Colin Druhan, Executive Director  
[Pride at Work Canada](#), and WINS Advisory Board Member**

# Showcasing Community Voices

## “What can employers do to make workplaces more inclusive for LGBTQIA+ refugees and immigrants?”



### **Surranna Sandy is the Chief Executive Officer of Skills for Change**

There are several ways in which employers can make workplaces more inclusive for the LGBTQIA+ immigrant and refugee community. Employers should provide awareness about sexuality and gender across their workplaces, using a cultural lens. It's critical to understand the specific challenges that individuals in the community have faced, depending on their culture, the country and/or situation they've come from. As we know, many countries have criminalized being LGBTQIA+; some seek refuge here in Canada and may have specific trauma related to their experiences in their home countries. Having a better understanding of this can lead to increased compassion, openness, and awareness across the organization. Where the employer feels it's out of their scope (such as providing specific mental health supports), partnering with community organizations such as Skills for Change which specializes in programming for the LGBTQIA+ and/or immigrant and refugee services will provide holistic support and assistance for their employees.

### **Claudia Hepburn is CEO of Windmill Microlending, Former co-founder NEXT Canada**

There is a rich pool of newcomers from diverse communities who are looking for work, but unable to find it due to the specifications around vague categories like 'Canadian experience'. We don't hear much about any attempt to reach out to this constituency. Many newcomers and temporary foreign workers have the necessary skills for most of the vacant jobs. What we need is targeted outreach and an assessment system that acknowledges related prior experience. Now that we as a society begin to consider the contours of life after COVID, organizations have to renew their commitment to EDI initiatives with specific goals and expected outcomes.



### **Brian G. Bachand is the founder of evolution evolution**

The answer is simple. It is not about what employers must do that is the issue. Rather, it is how employers must be. The most important aspect in creating an inclusive environment for LGBTQIA+ refugees and immigrants as employees is being aware of their presence. Presence is aligned with how you listen, empower, and appreciate others. DEI training and workshops are a catalyst of positive education for every organization. However, in the end, it comes down to how each employer embraces with self-awareness their presence as a leader. This is what creates inclusive environments, not just programs. LGBTQIA+ refugees and immigrants have a courageous spirit. They have a powerful story of coming to stand in their truth as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Let their presence inspire inclusive workplaces for all.



### **Sue Chan is VP Digital & Technology, Loyalty at RBC and a WINS Advisory Board member**

There are many research reports informing us that inclusive workplace model results in high performance team.

The outcomes are good both for the employees and the business bottom line, especially in the current tight labour market. Organizations could adopt many tactics, depending on their size and maturing level. It is very important to realize that actions should be taken at enterprise level as well as individual manager level. A high performing team and business has diversity and inclusion as a part of their culture at all levels of the organization, with the understanding that transparency and observability are directly correlated to trust building and desired outcomes. Some useful tactics include: (a) create mutual trust by education and communication, (b) have role models and celebrate success stories, (c) cultivate a Safe to Speak Up culture, and (d) metrics – set goals, measure and share progress.





**Sheryll Young is a Senior Manager with Vialto Partners**

If we acknowledge that the root cause of inequality is systemic, creating inclusive workplaces for marginalized groups will happen when employers dismantle the institutional barriers and social discrimination that exist. Diversity audits can be done to understand the different types of discrimination these groups are facing. Marginalized communities want acceptance and feel unsafe in their workplace because they experience rejection, fear reprisal, or lack career opportunities and chances for advancement. An audit designed to create enterprise-wide accountability can change the systems to make career attraction, retention and advancement more equitable, which will promote better engagement and ultimately inclusion.

**Marcos A. Persaud is a Senior Diversity and Inclusion Specialist at Maple Leaf Foods**

Minimize your assumptions by using inclusive language. For example, gendered terms like 'boyfriend' or 'wife' can be a barrier for the LGBTQIA+ community and may "out" someone when asking. Use gender-neutral terms like partner or spouse instead. Mentor LGBTQIA+ refugees and immigrants. Having a senior person mentor an employee can help them transition personally and professionally. Demonstrate your commitment to the LGBTQIA+ community year-round. Some refugees and immigrants may arrive from countries that are not openly accepting of the LGBTQIA+ community. Show your support in various actions, LGBTQIA+ employee resource groups, pride, benefits, policies, and more!



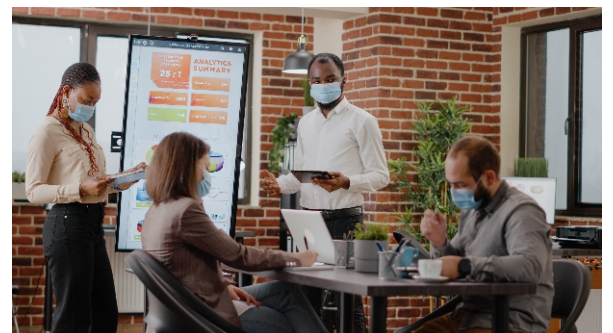
## From the Newsstand

How can businesses support LGBTQIA+ refugees in the workplace? In a recent article two LGBTQIA+ commentators provide three ideas<sup>1</sup>. Most important, they say, is actually hiring LGBTQIA+ refugees. "Once a refugee gets a job, that's the moment they stop being a refugee – it helps them forge friendships, build a social network, and make a living." Second, employees and managers can act as mentors to LGBTQIA+ refugees. "This is a low-cost, but incredibly effective action," they argue. Third, businesses can raise the voices of LGBTQIA+ refugees: "Many LGBTQIA+ refugees have had to silence their own voices out of fear of persecution. But you can use your company's reach and influence to put LGBTQIA+ refugees on your consumers' radar. Advocating for this group brings attention to the issue and mobilizes other to support LGBTQIA+ refugees."

As part of WINS initiative called "Showcasing Diverse Voices", we use community research to forge solutions for workplace inclusion irrespective of an individual's dimensions of diversity. Through this initiative we are engaging in consultation, advocacy, and dialogue to help eliminate workplace discrimination in Canada.

In 2022, we conducted a survey to explore and understand the employment inequities that may have been heightened during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The survey report is now available on our website at  
<https://www.winscanada.com/showcasing-diverse-voices>



<sup>1</sup> A. David and H. Ulukaya, "3 ways businesses can support LGBTQ refugees in the workplace," June 21, 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/3-ways-businesses-support-lgbtq-refugees-workplace/>