



## Engaging SMEs: National Business Networks and Local Design Perspectives

A REPORT ON THE ENGAGING SMEs PROJECT



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## ABOUT IMMIGRANT EMPLOYMENT COUNCIL OF BC

The Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC) is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to empowering BC employers with the solutions, tools, and resources needed to effectively attract, hire, and retain skilled immigrant talent. We understand that the successful integration of skilled newcomers into BC's labor force is essential to both their success and the province's long-term economic performance. By collaborating with employers, government, and other partner stakeholders, we ensure that BC employers can effectively integrate global talent.



## ABOUT IMMIGRANT EMPLOYMENT COUNCILS OF CANADA (IECC)

The National Network of Immigrant Employment Councils is a collaborative body dedicated to forging effective partnerships and innovative solutions. It aims to significantly improve labor market outcomes for immigrants and support a stronger Canadian economy.

### PROJECT FUNDER



Immigration, Refugees  
and Citizenship Canada

### RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PARTNER

The Conference  
Board of Canada



### PROJECT PARTNERS





# ABOUT THE PROJECT

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) are often underrepresented in settlement programs like employer roundtables, advisory councils, mentoring initiatives, and networking events. While large corporations generally have the resources and structures to engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and effectively leverage immigrant talent, SMEs often face unique challenges. Their smaller scale, varied operational capacities, and limited resources can make it difficult for them to fully participate in such efforts. As a result, their voices and perspectives are often missing from discussions about immigrant employment.

Despite these challenges, SMEs are adopting practices commonly seen in larger organizations like mentorship programs, additional training opportunities, language and communication support, assistance with immigration and settlement processes, and the expansion of employee benefits. However, there remains significant untapped potential to further develop practices that reflect the specific needs and capacities of SMEs.

The Engaging SMEs project was designed to close this gap by engaging SMEs across Canada to better understand their labor market needs and challenges. The project aimed to co-create innovative, tailored solutions that would enhance SMEs' ability to access, hire, train, and retain immigrant talent, ensuring that their voices were heard and their unique challenges addressed.

Led by IEC-BC, the project brought together key partners from across the country, including the Calgary Region Immigrant Employment Council (CRIEC), Halifax Partnership (HXP), Immploy, Workforce Collective, and the New Brunswick Multicultural Council (NBMC).

The project also harnessed the strength of Canada's extensive settlement sector, a network of organizations that support immigrants and refugees as they navigate their new lives in Canada. These organizations provide critical services that help newcomers integrate socially, economically, culturally, and politically, all while aligning with the Canadian National Settlement Service Standards Framework. Through this collaboration, the project tapped into expertise and resources across multiple regions, ensuring that the solutions developed were locally relevant and nationally scalable.

This initiative deepened SME engagement and investment in the settlement process, empowering businesses to take a more active role in integrating immigrant talent. By harnessing insights from co-designed and piloted interventions, the project enhanced existing programs and services offered by participating partners, ensuring they were better aligned with the specific needs of SMEs. Additionally, the project sought to improve the coordination of settlement and community services, making them more responsive and effective in addressing the unique capacities and challenges faced by SMEs.





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The [Engaging SMEs](#) project, led by IEC-BC in collaboration with five other IECs and the Conference Board of Canada, addressed the critical need for Canadian SMEs to effectively recruit, hire, and retain skilled newcomer immigrants. By focusing on SMEs—often overlooked in immigrant employment programs—the project aimed to bridge the gap between these businesses and the immigrant talent pool, ultimately strengthening Canada’s labor market and economy.

Involving [127 SMEs](#) across key regions in Canada, including Calgary, AB; New Brunswick; British Columbia; Halifax, NS; Niagara, ON; and London, ON, the project exceeded initial targets by engaging these businesses in interactive design labs. Employing a design thinking approach, these labs facilitated collaboration with the settlement sector to co-create six innovative solutions tailored to the unique needs of SMEs. These solutions were then piloted and refined, resulting in a significant increase in employer readiness to hire newcomers. Notably, [91%](#) of participating SMEs expressed a strong likelihood of hiring immigrants in the future, with many reporting improved HR practices and a deeper understanding of the tools and resources necessary for successful immigrant hiring and retention.

Building on the project’s successes, this report recommends strengthening collaboration models to enhance SME navigation and engagement, supported by coordinated funding to streamline services and provide targeted training in DEI practices. Targeted messaging should promote the benefits of collaboration and share success stories to increase SME awareness and participation. Tested prototypes should be scaled and refined to remain adaptable to community needs, while personalized outreach and knowledge-sharing initiatives can foster stronger SME involvement. These strategies aim to sustain and expand the integration of newcomer talent, reinforcing Canada’s inclusive and competitive workforce.

Beyond the development of effective solutions, the project significantly enhanced SMEs’ awareness of the value of newcomer talent and the services offered by the settlement sector. This strengthened connection has empowered SMEs to actively participate in the settlement process, addressing barriers to hiring and retaining immigrants. By equipping businesses with the knowledge, tools, and support needed for success, the project has made a lasting impact on the SME sector and the broader immigrant community, fostering a more inclusive, innovative, and competitive Canadian workforce.

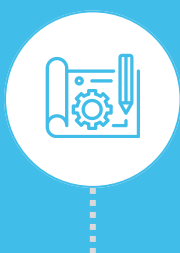


# PROJECT TIMELINE



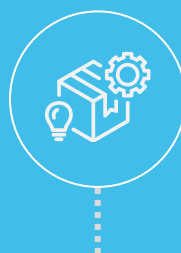
Establish national  
project team

DECEMBER 2021 -  
MARCH 2022



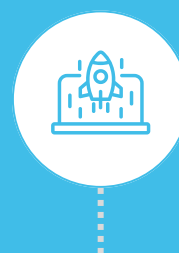
Engage SMEs across  
Canada through  
interactive Design Labs

APRIL 2022 -  
MARCH 2023



Co-create and  
test six proposed  
solutions

APRIL 2023 -  
MARCH 2024



Use prototypes to  
help SMEs engage  
immigrant talent

APRIL 2023 -  
MARCH 2024

# PROJECT TACTICS

## SME Networks Scanning

Each delivery partner conducted a comprehensive scan and identification of local SME networks and potential participants. This effort was essential for understanding the landscape and engaging relevant stakeholders.

## Project Charter and National Team

A collaboration charter was established, outlining the project's objectives, scope, and deliverables. The national project team played a key role in ensuring effective coordination and communication across all regions. A Project Measurement Framework (PMF) was also developed and shared with the project funder and the evaluation partner.

## Design Lab Implementation Plan

A detailed national implementation plan for the design labs was developed, specifying timelines, resource allocations, and key milestones.

The plan was disseminated, and partners were briefed to ensure smooth execution across regions.

## Engagement Strategy

An overarching employer engagement strategy, along with key messages, was developed to guide employer interactions and ensure their active participation and commitment to the project.

## Recruitment

Efforts were made to recruit and engage 8-10 employers per region, aiming for a total of 60 employers (approx. 60-75 individuals). Employers were selected based on their relevance and potential contribution to the project.

## Ongoing Relationship Building

Continuous efforts were undertaken to build and maintain relationships with employers, ensuring their sustained involvement and strengthening the network.


## Employer Feedback

Regular feedback was gathered from employers and facilitators to understand their experiences and perspectives through post-session surveys and reports. This feedback was crucial for refining engagement strategies and enhancing the overall project approach.



A smiling man with a beard, wearing a plaid shirt, is looking at a wall covered in numerous colorful sticky notes. A hand from the right side of the frame is pointing at one of the sticky notes. The background is a light blue gradient.

# WHAT MADE THIS PROJECT UNIQUE?



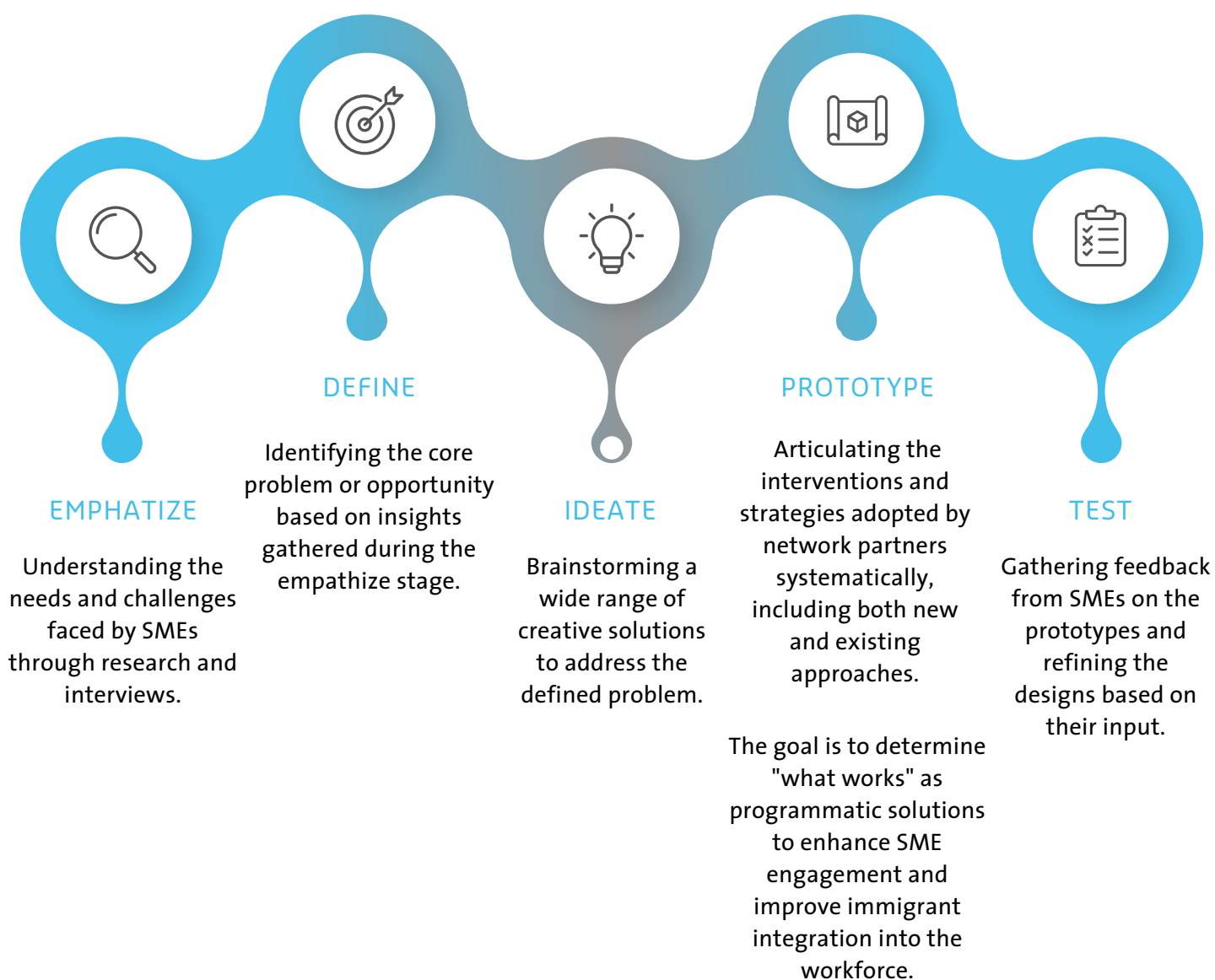
This project distinguished itself through its innovative use of the **design thinking approach**, which was central to engaging SMEs and developing tailored solutions.

By employing a mixed-methods research strategy and implementing interactive Design Labs, the project provided collaborative environments where participants developed solutions to enhance SMEs' ability to attract, hire, train, and retain immigrant talent.

The Design Labs were interactive and participatory roundtables where employers and SMEs co-created and articulated prototypes with clear research goals and corresponding evaluation plans. Inspired by human-centered design principles, these labs placed the needs of the people at the core of the process, ensuring that the solutions were relevant and practical. This strategy not only strengthened relationships between SMEs and key stakeholders but also established a solid foundation for ongoing engagement, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse workforce.



# DESIGN THINKING PROCESS



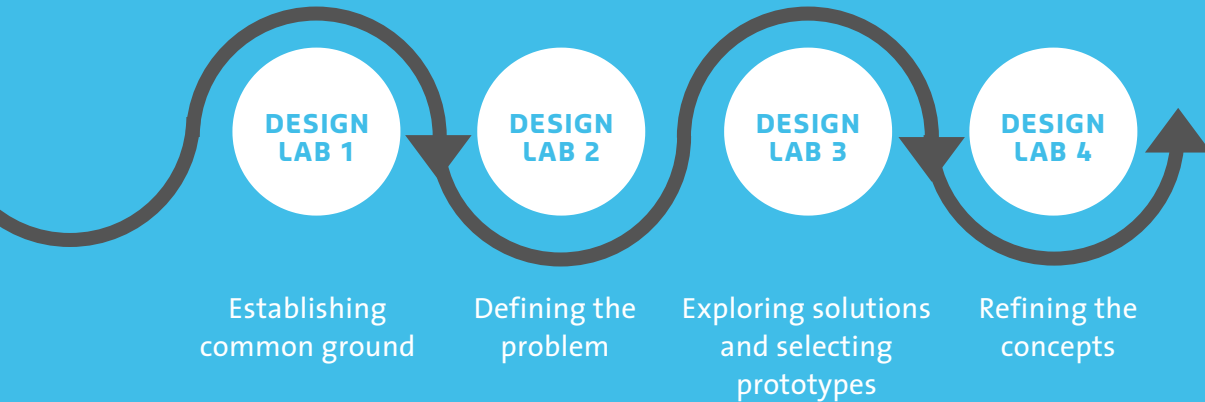
# DESIGN LAB IMPLEMENTATION

# 48

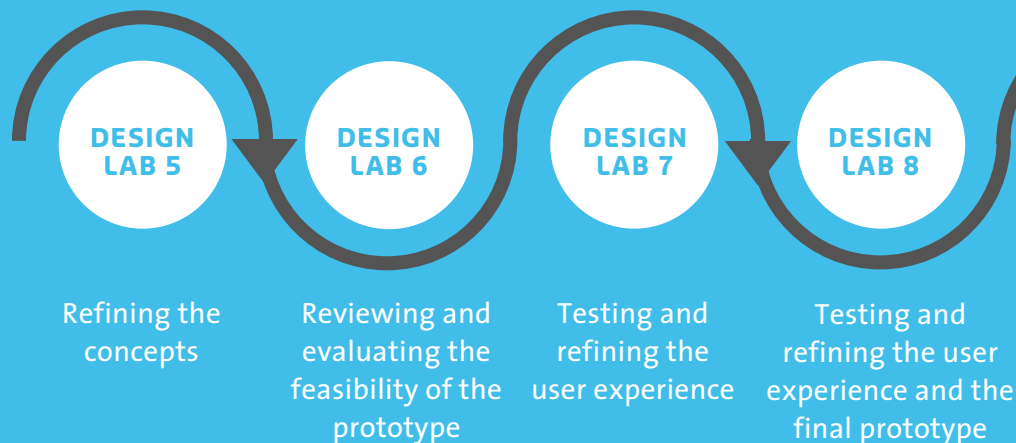
## DESIGN LABS

were strategically implemented across six regions throughout the duration of the project.

## PROTOTYPE DEVELOPMENT



## PROTOTYPE TESTING



# PROTOTYPE DEVELOPMENT



## DESIGN LAB 1

Introducing participants to the principles of Design Lab thinking and exploring the workforce needs, challenges, and barriers SMEs face in recruiting, hiring, and retaining immigrant employees. The sessions focused on fostering a deep understanding of these issues, with mind maps serving as the key tool to capture and visualize participants' insights and ideas.



## DESIGN LAB 2

Participants refined and prioritized the problems they were most interested in addressing. After identifying three key challenges, they prepared to brainstorm solutions, focusing on framing the challenges as 'How might we' questions.



## DESIGN LAB 3

Participants developed potential solutions to the design challenges identified in Design Lab 2. Lab 3 emphasized brainstorming innovative solutions. Participants evaluated a range of potential approaches, ultimately narrowing the focus to a few viable prototypes that could help overcome recruitment and retention challenges.

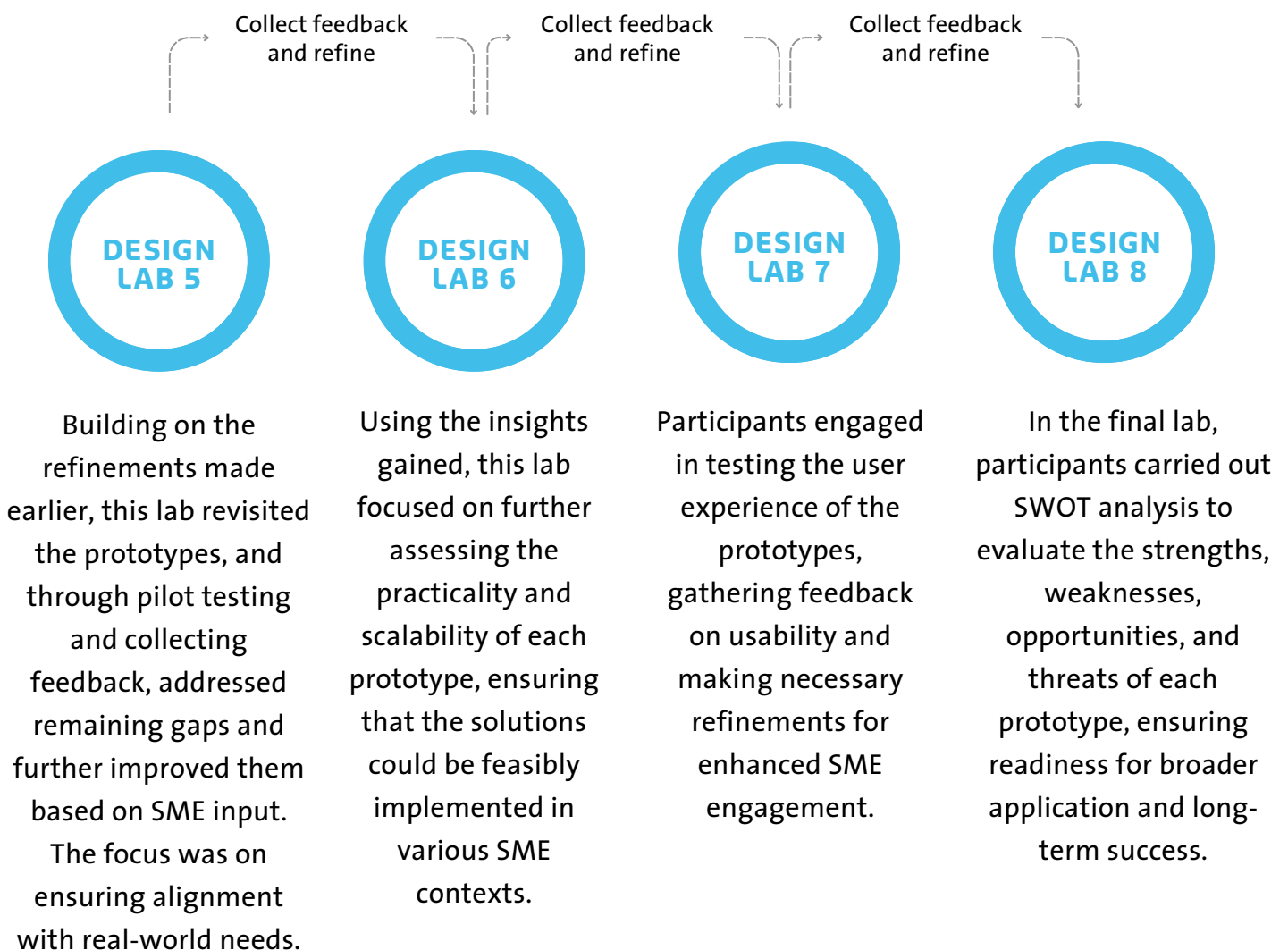


## DESIGN LAB 4

Participants refined their selected prototypes, discussing detailed feedback from SMEs to improve the proposed solutions. This iterative process allowed for deeper engagement and more practical, context-specific solutions. A draft proposal for all six prototypes was submitted, detailing the concept, the user experience challenge or problem each aimed to address, the expected impact, and the timeline and resources required for implementation.

# PROTOTYPE TESTING

Six prototypes were developed and tested during Design Labs 5 through 8.






# THE ROLE OF THE



# FACILITATORS

**Facilitators** from each of the partnering organizations played a pivotal role in building and managing relationships with SMEs throughout the project. Beyond their outreach responsibilities, they led the Design Labs in their respective regions, cultivating a respectful and open environment where all participants felt empowered to contribute transparent and bold feedback and ideas. A key focus was ensuring that every participant had an equal opportunity to express their ideas, thereby creating an inclusive space for dialogue and collaboration.

Facilitators also played a critical role in guiding discussions and capturing the ideas and insights shared during the sessions—an essential component for the project's success. These insights were instrumental in producing detailed post-session reports that highlighted main themes and key takeaways. Additionally, facilitators were equipped with comprehensive guidelines and toolkits that supported both the prototype development and testing phases, ensuring that the project's objectives were met with precision and efficiency.



I really enjoyed having people from all different industries involved, because it was fascinating to hear the hotel industry [engaging with] hospitality, then [with] healthcare, and [with] manufacturing. They all had different scales [of operations] and different internal resources.

Project Facilitator

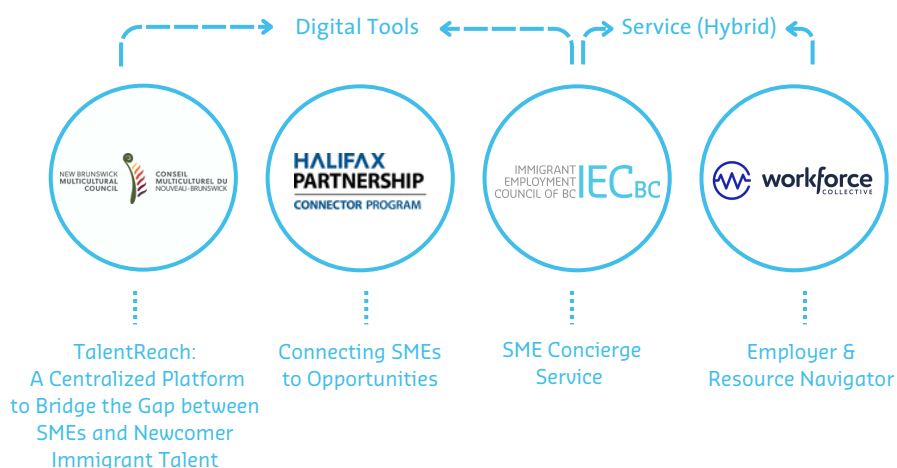


# PROTOTYPES PER REGION

## ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT



## OFFERING NAVIGATION SUPPORTS





## PROTOTYPE 1

Partner Organization:

Calgary Region Immigrant Employment Council (CRIEC)

### **Employer Advisory Council (EAC)**

This prototype entails the establishment of an Advisory Council including Calgary-based SME employers, Service Provider Organizations, and other stakeholders dedicated to hiring immigrant talent. The council aims to tackle significant issues associated with the integration of newcomers into the workforce.

The council will function for an initial duration of two to three years, with the option for renewal to ensure continuity and include new viewpoints. The EAC will convene four to six times per year, with continuous activities scheduled during members' tenure to further the prototype's goals.

## PROTOTYPE 2

Partner Organization: IMMPLOY

### **Opportunity Bridge: Connecting Industries & Immigrant Talent**

This prototype emphasizes organizing sector-specific events that link companies with immigrant talent in designated geographic areas. This effort, in collaboration with local economic development groups and business associations, aims to meet the growing need for qualified immigrant workers in critical industry areas.

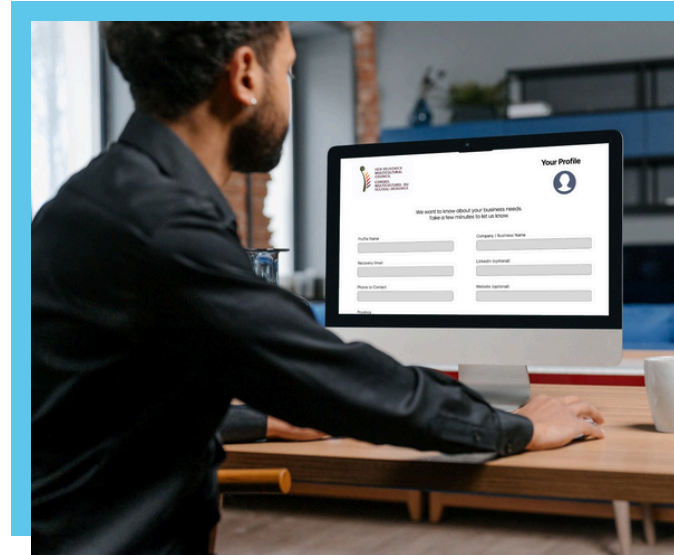


### PROTOTYPE 3

Partner Organization: New Brunswick Multicultural Centre

## TalentReach - A Centralized Platform to Bridge the Gap between SMEs and Newcomer Immigrant Talent

The TalentReach prototype is designed to address the needs of both employers and immigrant job seekers in New Brunswick. This centralized platform aims to bridge the gap between SMEs seeking skilled workers and newcomers looking for employment opportunities.

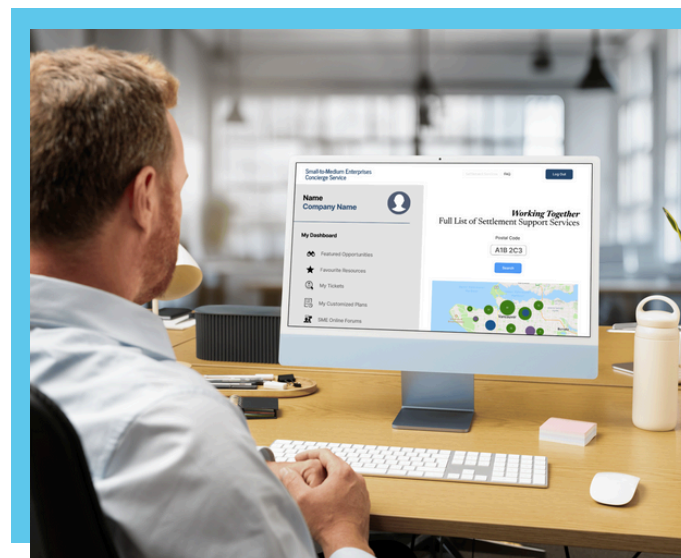


### PROTOTYPE 4

Partner Organization: Immigrant Employment Council of BC

## SME Concierge Service

The SME Concierge Service prototype delivers a personalized employer navigation experience, providing a comprehensive platform that combines both in-person and digital support. This hybrid approach equips SMEs with a variety of resources and personalized referral support, guiding them through every stage of recruiting, retaining, and integrating immigrant employees. It adapts to both current and evolving business needs, ensuring ongoing support for SMEs as they navigate the complexities of workforce development.



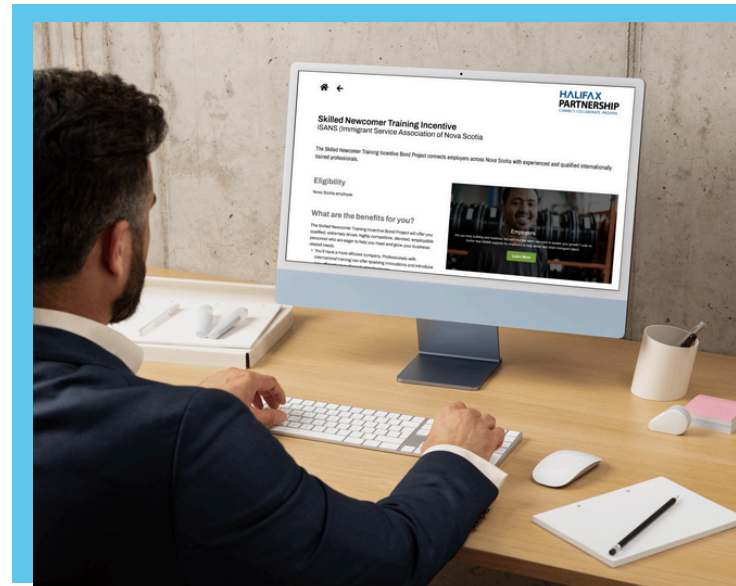
## PROTOTYPE 5

Partner Organization: Halifax Partnership

### Connecting SMEs to Opportunities

The Immigrant Employment Hub prototype envisions a one-stop shop website that empowers SMEs to recruit and integrate newcomer immigrant talent. This platform aims to be a comprehensive resource, eliminating the need for employers to search for scattered information across various sources.

The prototype addresses a key need for readily accessible information. Integrating two-way communication features significantly enhances its value to SMEs. Collaboration with immigration experts will ensure the platform consistently provides up-to-date, reliable information. By refining its weaknesses and building on its strengths and opportunities, the Immigrant Employment Hub has the potential to become a powerful tool for empowering newcomer immigrant talent and contributing to a more diverse and prosperous local economy.



## PROTOTYPE 6

Partner Organization: Workforce Collective

### Employer & Resource Navigator

The Employer & Resource Navigator prototype offers a unique solution to bridge the gap between SMEs and the resources available to support them in hiring and integrating newcomer immigrant talent. This initiative recognizes the challenges SMEs encounter when navigating the complexities of hiring newcomers and creating inclusive workplaces. The service goes beyond simply informing SMEs—it offers personalized assistance tailored to their needs. Efforts to secure additional resources for staff expansion demonstrate a strong commitment to ensuring the program's sustainability.





# SME Engagement:

## Key outcomes and insights

Throughout the project,

**127** SMES were recruited and engaged

**73** were involved in the prototype development phase

Calgary, AB - 16  
New Brunswick - 15  
British Columbia - 13  
Halifax, NS - 9  
Niagara, ON - 9  
London, ON - 11

**54** were involved in the prototype testing phase

Calgary, AB - 8  
New Brunswick - 12  
British Columbia - 8  
Halifax, NS - 9  
Niagara, ON - 8  
London, ON - 9

Participants built strong connections within their regions, agreeing to stay in touch to support each other and share knowledge and resources for future tasks. To sustain engagement, Project Delivery Partners invited them to join new projects.

Most participants expressed excitement and eagerness to contribute and follow the progress of these initiatives.

The project **recruited** and **involved** a total of **127** SMEs across all participating regions, surpassing its target by **28%**.



**104** SMEs completed the baseline survey

**8** DESIGN LABS were conducted successfully across all regions; each session hosting an average of 10 participants

Throughout the project, 24 one-on-one interviews with SMEs and 12 with facilitators were conducted, particularly following Design Lab 4 and Design Lab 8. These interviews provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of the Design Lab process, deepening our understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by SMEs and facilitators. This feedback played a crucial role in shaping the project's outcomes.

In collaboration with external evaluators at the Conference Board of Canada, the project team developed key reports about the project deliverables. These include eight post-session summary reports, a mid-point evaluation report, two interview reports with SMEs and facilitators, a final evaluation report, and a final project report for publication.



# KEY FINDINGS



Of all participating SMEs,

**94%** reported [high satisfaction with Design Lab experience](#), demonstrating high motivation and active participation in the co-design process. The design thinking approach used in the Design Labs proved to be an effective and innovative method for engaging SMEs and facilitating a deeper learning environment to understand their challenges and barriers.

**91%** indicated a [likelihood of hiring immigrants in the future](#), demonstrating the project's impact on their hiring strategies.

**67%** of SMEs expressed a [willingness to work with settlement sector organizations](#), underscoring greater motivation to collaborate with these entities to recruit, hire, and retain immigrant talent.

**91%** indicated their [likelihood to continue working with an IEC or an immigrant serving organization](#) in the future, showing how IECs has successfully expanded their reach to more SMEs within their communities, increasing their visibility and impact.

These achievements highlight the project's success in meeting its objectives and making a meaningful impact on participating SMEs and their communities.

“

I think [this project] really allowed us to clarify our purpose, our intent, and our mission moving forward, [while identifying] how best we could serve the local immigrant community and [determine] what we can do to help them navigate the employment landscape more effectively. ”

SME Participant

“

The actual meetings created [opportunities for meaningful] conversations, and [those] conversations sometimes [are] the best way to get to the end goal. What we achieved, I think, was [an] understanding that there's a community of people [who] have the same struggles and [exploring] how we can all kind of connect to support each other. ”

SME Participant

# IMPACT





### Strong SME interest demonstrated in recruiting, hiring, and retaining newcomer immigrant talent

The data indicate a growing recognition among SMEs of the value that newcomer immigrant talent brings. Participating SMEs expressed clear interest in recruiting, hiring, and retaining immigrant talent, both now and in the future. A substantial number of employers are actively seeking to recruit and hire immigrant workers. However, there remains a significant gap between positive intentions and tangible actions. Many SMEs lack the capacity, resources, and internal business support to effectively recruit and retain newcomer talent, often relying on external recruiters or community referrals for assistance.



### Increased SME awareness of IEC and settlement sector services, with strengthened interest in collaboration

Before the project, most participating SMEs had limited to no knowledge of the services offered by IECs and the broader settlement sector. However, through the project's initiatives, there has been a significant shift. SMEs now demonstrate a heightened awareness of these services and a stronger inclination toward ongoing collaboration.





### Ongoing collaboration established between IECs and SMEs towards more coordinated engagement

The current approach to engaging SMEs shows significant promise and progress, but refining it is essential for long-term success. While SMEs have expressed increased interest, sustaining their involvement requires a more coordinated and purposeful approach. Active and strategic collaboration among settlement service providers within communities is crucial. Moving forward, local IECs and the settlement sector must take the lead in developing a coordinated approach, creating a "one-stop shop" model that helps SMEs easily navigate the available support tailored to their evolving business needs and involvement stages.

To strengthen this collaboration, targeted outreach materials and events should be crafted specifically for SMEs, with a focus on building strong relationships with key decision-makers within businesses and business communities. Additionally, the project has been instrumental in facilitating the development of coordinated settlement services that are more responsive to the specific needs of SMEs.



### Promising partnership models developed for effective collaboration with SMEs

The project identified effective partnership models and engagement strategies for working with SMEs. Key approaches include personalized outreach, in-depth needs assessments, design thinking for problem-solving and co-solutioning, and the launch of co-branded and community-driven collaborative initiatives.





### Key supports identified for SMEs to effectively integrate newcomer immigrant talent

The research identified essential support areas that SMEs require to effectively integrate newcomer immigrant talent. These include understanding the relevance and transferability of foreign credentials and professional experience to Canadian workplaces, assessing newcomers' existing skills and competencies, and accessing employer-focused resources. It also highlighted the importance of strengthening partnerships, offering unconscious bias training, building capacity for intercultural skills, and implementing DEI initiatives. Sustainable efforts are essential to educate employers on the benefits of a diverse workforce and equip them with practical strategies for attracting, hiring, and retaining newcomer immigrant talent.



### Tailored solutions created to connect SMEs with newcomer immigrant talent

Through this initiative, six prototypes were developed to address the specific needs of SMEs within their local communities. These prototypes hold significant potential to improve immigrant employment outcomes. Over 86% of participating SMEs expressed that the co-designed prototypes would benefit their organizations. Additionally, 100% of participants indicated that other SMEs would likely employ the prototypes.

# LESSONS LEARNED



The Engaging SMEs project provided valuable insights into effective strategies for integrating skilled newcomer immigrants into the SME workforce. Several important lessons emerged throughout the initiative, offering guidance on how to better engage and support SMEs in this process. These insights are crucial for refining future initiatives to improve immigrant employment outcomes and ensure meaningful integration within SMEs.

## Customized and Purposeful Engagement

- **Customized Support:** The project highlighted the importance of customizing engagement with SMEs based on their specific challenges and needs. SMEs differ widely in size, industry, culture, and resource availability. Adapting strategies to these unique characteristics can greatly improve the effectiveness of support programs.
- **Strategic Outreach and Communication:** Strategic outreach and targeted communication that emphasizes the specific benefits and support available to SMEs proved critical for sparking interest and ensuring active participation.
- **Building Trust and Relationships:** Establishing strong, trust-based relationships with SMEs is key to successful engagement. Consistent interaction and providing reliable support build trust, encouraging SMEs to commit to long-term initiatives and collaborate in addressing immigrant employment challenges.
- **Leadership Buy-in:** Securing the involvement of SME leadership is essential for driving policy changes and fostering a company-wide commitment to integrating and supporting immigrant employees, which is essential for sustainable success.

## Continuous Improvement and Program Adaptation

- **Feedback Mechanisms:** The project underscored the importance of robust feedback mechanisms. Gathering insights from SMEs about the usability and effectiveness of prototypes enables ongoing improvements, ensuring the solutions' relevance and effectiveness.

- **Iterative Development:** The design thinking approach facilitated iterative development and refinement of solutions, where prototyping, testing, feedback, and revision helped ensure solutions remained aligned with SME needs and evolving conditions.
- **Adaptability to Changing Needs:** The business environment and challenges faced by SMEs constantly evolve. The project emphasized the need for flexible program design that adapts to external changes, such as economic shifts or changes in immigration policies.
- **Scaling with Customization:** While it's important to develop scalable prototypes, the project also recognized the value of customization within these solutions to address local or sector-related challenges faced by SMEs.

## Leveraging Data and Sharing Best Practices

- **Data-Driven Approaches:** Integrating empirical data and research into engagement strategies helped shape more grounded and effective interventions, ensuring alignment with real-world SME needs.
- **Collaborative Learning:** Encouraging networking and collaborative learning among SMEs, where they could share experiences and solutions, significantly enhanced engagement and strengthened their collective capacity to integrate immigrant talent. This collaborative approach enhanced the ecosystem supporting immigrant employment, promoting shared growth and best practices among SMEs.
- **Sustainability Considerations:** The project highlighted the importance of planning for the sustainability of initiatives from the outset, considering how to maintain and support initiatives beyond the life of the project through funding, policies, and stakeholder engagement.

These insights from the Engaging SMEs project offer essential guidance for future efforts aimed at enhancing the integration of skilled immigrants into the SME workforce, ensuring that initiatives are not only effective in the short term but also sustainable over the long term.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

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Building on the project's successes and insights, this report offers several strategic recommendations to enhance the integration of skilled newcomer immigrants into the Canadian SME workforce. These recommendations aim to ensure sustainable improvements and broader implementation of successful practices developed through the project.

## **Explore new collaboration models to support SME Navigation and Engagement in welcoming efforts:**

- **Review Resource Allocation:** It is highly recommended to review current funding models to enable more effective and coordinated services across the settlement sector, rather than funding multiple similar initiatives. Dedicated funding should support partnership coordination and provide additional resources for SME training and development in DEI practices. This approach aims to improve and sustain immigrant employment outcomes by ensuring better navigation and accessibility of service and support. Through this, local SMEs will be better equipped to engage with and access newcomer talent through existing local programs and resources.
- **Targeted Messaging and Communication:** IECs and immigrant-serving organizations should invest in targeted messaging to promote their support and offerings to SMEs. These communications should highlight the benefits of collaboration by leveraging emerging best practices and success stories. Engaging broader system actors—such as chambers of commerce and local educational institutions—can help build a more welcoming and inclusive ecosystem.

## Implement and Scale Up Prototypes:

- **Implementation and Scaling:** Prototypes that have demonstrated potential for improving access to newcomer immigrant talent should be explored for implementation at scale to create a supportive ecosystem for SMEs and the settlement sector.
- **Continuous Refinement:** As these prototypes are scaled, continuous refinement through feedback and evolving community needs is essential to maintain their effectiveness and relevance across regional contexts.

## Refine Engagement Strategies to Include Targeted Outreach and Support:

- **Streamlining SME Engagement:** To secure ongoing SME involvement and avoid duplication or competition among IECs and the settlement sector, engagement strategies should be refined. This includes more personalized and targeted outreach efforts, along with clearer communication of the specific benefits and available support for SMEs.
- **Knowledge Sharing and Community Involvement:** Intentional knowledge sharing through conferences and forums can disseminate effective strategies and insights for SME engagement. This will benefit the national settlement sector and support SMEs in enhancing their employment practices for newcomer immigrants.

These recommendations build on the initial successes of the project, ensuring that progress in integrating newcomer immigrants into SMEs is sustained and expanded across Canada. In doing so, these efforts will strengthen both the economic and social fabric of communities nationwide.



# SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

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## Sustainability Plan for Lasting Impact: Ensuring Continued Success of the Engaging SMEs Project

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This outlines strategic actions to ensure that the project delivers long-term benefits to SMEs, the broader business community, and settlement services. By fostering a supportive ecosystem for continued collaboration and innovation, the project aims to improve newcomer immigrant employment outcomes and sustain its positive impact.

The plan's objective is to maintain engagement, refine and scale prototypes, and foster ongoing collaboration among employers and project partners to ensure the project's continued success and impact.

## Maintain Engagement and Involvement

- **Ongoing Communication:** Maintain regular updates to all participating SMEs, IECs, and stakeholders via newsletters, emails, and dedicated meetings to keep them informed of project developments, insights, and future initiatives.
- **Feedback Mechanism:** Implement a structured system to gather continuous input from SMEs and stakeholders, ensuring their needs and suggestions are integrated into future activities.
- **Recognition and Incentives:** Organize annual recognition events to celebrate the contributions and achievements of SMEs and partners, fostering a sense of community and continued involvement.
- **Targeted Events:** Host a series of sector-specific events supported by labor market data. These events should be goal-oriented, easily measurable, and adaptable to different regions to meet local needs.

## Refine and Scale Prototypes

- **Prototype Evaluation:** Regularly assess the effectiveness of the developed prototypes using user feedback and performance metrics, refining them to enhance their impact and scalability.
- **Beta Launch:** Some partners have begun beta testing selected prototypes in real-world settings to test their feasibility and impact, gathering essential data to inform further refinement and scaling.
- **Funding and Resources:** Secure long-term funding for the implementation and scaling of successful prototypes through exploring partnerships with government agencies, private sector sponsors, and philanthropic organizations.
- **Training and Support:** Provide ongoing training and support for SMEs on how to effectively utilize the prototypes. Develop comprehensive guides, webinars, and workshops to facilitate knowledge transfer and capacity building.
- **Personalized Solutions:** Work directly with employers to assess their needs and capacity, offering personalized solutions that address immediate challenges while fostering long-term relationships.

## Foster Ongoing Collaboration

- **Strategic Partnerships:** Strengthen partnerships with IECs, Chambers of Commerce, Boards of Trade, and other relevant organizations to create a cohesive support network for SMEs.
- **Advisory SME Councils:** Establish regional advisory councils consisting of key stakeholders to guide project activities, provide insights, and ensure alignment with local needs and priorities.
- **Networking Opportunities:** Organize regular networking events, forums, and workshops to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration among SMEs and other stakeholders.
- **Post-Design Lab Meetings:** Organize one-on-one meetings with select participants after major sessions to gain deeper insights and foster stronger connections.

## Ongoing Knowledge Mobilization and Policy Advocacy

- **Policy Recommendations:** Use project insights to advocate for policies that support the recruitment, hiring, and retention of newcomer immigrant talent. Engage employers and policymakers to influence decisions that benefit SMEs and the wider community.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** Share best practices, success stories, and project findings through publications, conferences, and online platforms. Create a resource repository accessible to all stakeholders.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Periodically review the knowledge mobilization plan to identify areas for improvement and ensure it remains effective in addressing ongoing labor market trends.

## Long-Term Impact Assessment

- **Impact Metrics:** Develop and implement a set of metrics to measure the project's long-term impact on SME engagement, newcomer immigrant employment outcomes, and community integration. This remains a priority topic at the IECC leadership level.
- **Regular Reporting:** Establish employer feedback forums to create a robust reporting structure that tracks progress, outcomes, and lessons learned, ensuring transparency, accountability, and ongoing engagement.

## Additional Insights

- **Engagement and Dialogue:** The engagement of SME representatives in the Design Labs was highly successful. Facilitators encouraged open and candid dialogue using the Design Thinking approach. This led to measurable outcomes and agreements on establishing targeted events.
- **Understanding Barriers:** Meeting employers where they are and understanding their challenges was essential. Personalized solutions were designed to support employers in addressing their current needs while building longer-term relationships.
- **Successful Conclusion at Design Lab 8:** The final Design Lab session allowed delivery partners to comprehensively review the project and share insights. Discussions extended beyond the prototypes, laying a strong foundation for future collaboration among participants.
- **Post-Design Lab Meetings:** Some partners organized one-on-one meetings with select participants to deepen their understanding and strengthen networks. These additional touchpoints have forged new partnerships and set the stage for future collaborations.
- **Launch of Employer Feedback Forums:** Building on the success of this project, the Employer Feedback Forums have incorporated many learnings. The feedback forums will continue the successful engagement strategies established in the SME project, ensuring SMEs remain a key focus.





# CONCLUSION

The Engaging SMEs project has demonstrated significant potential in improving employment outcomes for immigrant workers through strategic engagement with SMEs. By leveraging design thinking and collaborative prototyping methodologies, this initiative marks a significant step in enhancing how settlement services and SMEs work together for mutual benefit.

## Impact and Innovations

- **Novel Approaches:** The project's novel use of design thinking to address real-world challenges has been a key highlight. This approach facilitated deeper insights into the specific issues SMEs face, enabling the creation of tailored solutions through an iterative, co-design process.
- **Deeper Engagement:** The design labs fostered closer collaboration between SMEs, IECs, and the settlement sector, encouraging SMEs to take a more active role in the settlement process. This improved their capacity to hire and retain immigrant talent and deepened their understanding of the challenges immigrants face.
- **Collaborative Solutions:** Participating SMEs developed six innovative prototypes tailored to meet specific local needs. These prototypes not only addressed specific recruitment and retention needs but also strengthened the support structure provided by settlement services.



## Outcomes and Contributions

- **Increased Hiring of Immigrants:** Participating SMEs reported a notable increase in immigrant hires, restructuring of HR practices, and a clearer understanding of the tools and resources necessary for attracting, hiring, and retaining immigrant talent.
- **Structured Framework and Coordinated Support:** A structured framework was established to streamline collaboration between IECs and SMEs, leading to more responsive, coordinated support tailored to SME needs. This has simplified the process for SMEs to hire immigrants directly through these partnerships.
- **Commitment to Community and Learning:** SMEs expressed a strong commitment to continued engagement with their communities and a dedication to collaborative efforts with other organizations for immigrant employment. They also recognized the value of continuous learning and networking with other SMEs to share best practices for newcomer integration.

## Advocacy and Future Engagement

- **Advocacy for Newcomer Employment:** Some SMEs have pledged to advocate for immigrant employment within their communities, recognizing the economic and social benefits. This advocacy not only expands their businesses but also contributes to community development and long-term brand success.

The Engaging SMEs project has laid a strong foundation for a collaborative, inclusive future. By equipping SMEs to harness the potential of a diverse workforce, the project fosters economic growth and prosperity for all Canadians.





720-750 West Pender Street, Vancouver, BC V6C 2T7 | T. 604-629-5364 | E. [info@iecbc.ca](mailto:info@iecbc.ca) | [iecbc.ca](http://iecbc.ca)