



Starting a New Business in Canada:

A Report From the Survey on Employment and Skills



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About the Survey on Employment & Skills

The Survey on Employment and Skills is conducted by the [Environics Institute for Survey Research](#), in partnership with the [Future Skills Centre](#) and the [Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University](#). In early 2020, the Survey on Employment and Skills began as a project designed to explore Canadians' experiences with the changing nature of work, including technology-driven disruptions, increasing insecurity and shifting skills requirements. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey was expanded to investigate the impact of the crisis on Canadians' employment, earnings and work environments. A second wave of the survey was conducted in December 2020, a third wave in June 2021, a fourth wave in March-April 2022, and fifth wave in March 2023, and a sixth wave in October-November 2023. This report focuses on the sixth wave of the survey that included 5,968 Canadians aged 18 and over from all provinces and territories. It was conducted both online (in the provinces) and by telephone (in the territories).

Survey reports can be found online at:

> <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/listing/-in-tags/type/survey-on-employment-and-skills>

> fsc-ccf.ca/research/2020-survey-on-employment-and-skills

> <https://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/research/future-skills/survey-on-employment-and-skills/>

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Executive Summary

Entrepreneurship is essential for economic growth, innovation, and job creation. In Canada, most private sector employment is in small and medium-sized enterprises, and many Canadians are self-employed. As of 2023, self-employed individuals represent 13.2% of Canada's labour force, ranging from precarious gig workers to highly paid specialists. Women represent a large portion of this population.

This study provides insights into Canada's entrepreneurial landscape, highlighting regional differences, demographic disparities, and motivations for self-employment. Understanding these variations can help tailor initiatives to support entrepreneurship more effectively and foster an inclusive and dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem that drives economic growth and innovation.

Study Design

This study is based on a multi-year survey conducted by the Environics Institute in partnership with the Diversity Institute and the Future Skills Centre. It explores Canadians' entrepreneurial experiences, intentions, and needs while focusing on demographic differences. This report focuses on the sixth wave of the survey, conducted from October 13 to November 23, 2023 which included a sample of 5,968 respondents from across the country.

Findings

Of the respondents who indicated they were not currently self-employed, 41% expressed interest in starting a new business. This interest varied by region as well as age and gender. Ontario had the highest entrepreneurial intent (47%), followed by Alberta and British Columbia (44% each). The Atlantic region and Saskatchewan had the lowest entrepreneurial aspirations (30%). Younger Canadians showed higher entrepreneurial intentions, peaking at 56.5% in the 18 to 20-year age range and decreasing with age. Women were generally less likely than men to express entrepreneurial intentions, with notable gaps in the 21 to 24-year and 30 to 34-year age ranges.

Recent immigrants (in Canada for 10 years or less) were the most likely to express interest in starting a business (63%), with intentions decreasing in successive generations. Indigenous respondents had higher entrepreneurial intentions (62%) than non-Indigenous counterparts (39%). Racialized individuals also showed higher intentions than white individuals, with South Asians (71%) and Black individuals (63%) showing the highest interest. Meanwhile, while those with disabilities represented a smaller proportion of the respondents, their entrepreneurial intent was higher than those without disabilities.

The primary motivation for self-employment among those who are not currently self-employed was the desire for autonomy and control (53%). Other motivations included pursuing unique opportunities (42%), achieving work-life balance (39%), and effectively delivering professional services (26%). Negative experiences in previous jobs, employment challenges, and a family tradition of entrepreneurship also influenced decisions.

Respondents who were not currently self-employed and expressed interest in starting a new business displayed strong confidence in their entrepreneurial skills, particularly determination, creativity, and digital literacy. However, confidence was lower in securing financial support and navigating government programs, indicating areas needing targeted support and training.



Conclusions and Implications

Regional differences in entrepreneurial intent suggest the need for region-specific policies and support systems to foster balanced economic growth across the country.

Demographic disparities in entrepreneurial intent demonstrate the need for tailored support that can inspire entrepreneurial ambitions. Integrating entrepreneurship education across disciplines and offering experiential learning opportunities can prepare students for entrepreneurial careers.

Immigrant and Indigenous entrepreneurs face significant barriers to success despite their drive and high entrepreneurial intentions. Tailored support – including addressing language difficulties, limited social networks, and access to funding – can help unlock their entrepreneurial potential.

Racialized entrepreneurs face systemic biases and limited access to funding and mentorship. Addressing these issues through targeted support and mentorship programs can help realize their entrepreneurial potential.

Persons with disabilities face significant challenges despite their high entrepreneurial intentions. It is crucial to provide accessible training, mentorship, and financial support tailored to their needs.



Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a critical driver of economic growth, innovation, and job creation.¹ In Canada, most private sector employment is concentrated in small and medium-sized enterprises, and many more Canadians are self-employed full- or part-time. This study draws on a large-scale survey to explore Canadian’s entrepreneurial experiences and intentions in more detail. Using data from the sixth-wave of a multi-year study by Environics Institute with the Diversity Institute and Future Skills Centre, we examine the entrepreneurial intentions of almost 6,000 Canadians through a diversity lens.

In 2022, private sector businesses in Canada employed 12.2 million people. Small and medium-sized enterprises employed 63.8% of the workforce, with 46.8% (5.7 million) working for small businesses and 17% (2.1 million) for medium-sized businesses.² As of 2023, there were an average of 2,652,600 self-employed people, representing 13.2% of the labour force.³ This figure encompasses diverse circumstances, including those fully or partially self-employed and some who hold multiple jobs alongside their self-employment activities. As highlighted in our previous research on “gig” work, self-employment income varies considerably. The spectrum ranges from platform workers in precarious employment situations, such as Uber drivers or Skip the Dishes delivery personnel, to highly compensated specialists like computer scientists and communication professionals.⁴

Nearly one million women in Canada were self-employed, accounting for 37% of the total self-employed population.⁵ Based on the Labour Force Survey (December 2023) and the Canadian Survey on Business Conditions (Quarter Four 2023), the majority of women entrepreneurs in Canada (about 83.7%) are self-employed (1,014,300)⁶ rather than the majority owners of incorporated SMEs (198,220).^{7,8}

Numerous national surveys in Canada provide insights into the entrepreneurial landscape. The Labour Force Survey offers a monthly assessment of the Canadian labour market, focusing on employment and unemployment, including self-employment trends, to inform policy decisions and economic planning.⁹ The Canadian Survey on Business Conditions collects data on business ownership, expectations, and conditions to help policymakers support businesses effectively.¹⁰ The Survey on Financing and Growth of Small and Medium Enterprises examines the types of financing SMEs use, their attempts to obtain new financing, barriers to growth, financial positions, ownership characteristics, and involvement in innovation and intellectual property.¹¹

For surveys specifically addressing motivations for starting a business, Ownr, a company under RBC Ventures, conducts a bi-annual survey that includes reasons why current business owners started their businesses, although it does not include Canadians who are not business owners.¹² Similarly, the Business Development Bank of Canada’s (BDC) survey of 1,025 Canadian entrepreneurs explores motivations for entrepreneurship but is also limited to current business owners.¹³





Internationally, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) measures various entrepreneurship-related factors within and across countries. It assesses the attitudes, activities, and characteristics of individuals starting and running new businesses. Its comprehensive framework includes indicators such as entrepreneurial intentions, perceived opportunities and capabilities, fear of failure, and societal values regarding entrepreneurship.¹⁴ According to GEM, total early-stage entrepreneurial activity for women globally was 10.1% compared to 12.7% for men in 2022. Total early-stage entrepreneurial activity for women in Canada is 14.8% (4.7% higher than the global average) and 18.3% for men.¹⁵ In 2022, the entrepreneurial intention rate for women globally was 17% compared to 20.4% for men. Canada had a lower entrepreneurial intention rate than the global average at 11.7% for women and 16.8% for men, respectively.¹⁶

Research has suggested a range of motivations and drivers for self-employment and entrepreneurial activity, with some being “pushed” because of exclusion from traditional labour markets. In contrast, others are “pulled” by opportunities and the desire to “be their own boss.”¹⁷ Recent research has also revealed significant differences among segments of the population. For example, a higher proportion of women choose self-employment to achieve a better work-life balance, while immigrants are more likely to pursue self-employment due to challenges in finding work as employees.¹⁸ However, it’s important to consider that these differences might be a product of the question phrasing. For this data, participants were only permitted to select one motivation for self-employment, indicating the “most important” motivation for them personally. If multiple responses were allowed, it is possible that these differences would be minimized.¹⁹

Recent research has highlighted several areas where entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs need support. For example, the State of Women’s Entrepreneurship report from the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub at the Diversity Institute emphasized the importance of wraparound supports such as child care, access to funding, networking opportunities, and coaching. It also pointed out the critical need for financial literacy and communication skills, particularly as it pertains to pitching ideas to potential investors and stakeholders.²⁰ In a study of 1,250 entrepreneurs, BDC identified four distinct groups of skills essential for entrepreneurial success: grit and relationship skills, leadership and people skills, marketing and finance skills, and operational administration skills.²¹ At the same time, many of the barriers to entrepreneurs are a result of bias in the system; and rather than focusing on “fixing” the entrepreneurs, more attention needs to be paid to ways to create more inclusive institutions and programming.²²

Our survey provides unique and valuable insights by measuring Canadians’ desire and intention to start businesses, highlighting the complex interplay of factors such as regional economic conditions, access to resources, personal skills and confidence, and identity group belonging. Our report delves deeper into the demographics, motivations, and needs of entrepreneurs and those aspiring. The methodology varies from the that of the Labour Force Survey. For example, we do not include “persons working in a family business without pay,” and we permit multi-selection to identify the diverse reasons driving individuals toward self-employment, offering a more comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurial motivations.

Study Design

This study's purpose is to explore several questions about Canadians' entrepreneurial intentions, drawing on data from the sixth wave of the multi-year Survey on *Employment and Skills*. This survey was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research in partnership with the Future Skills Centre and the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University.

In addition to collecting data on a range of individual characteristics, including demographics, employment, and income, and the study asked the following questions specific to entrepreneurship:

1. Thinking about your future career, how likely are you to one day start your own business?
2. We'd like to know more about why you are self-employed. Please tell us which of the following reasons for being self-employed, if any, describe your own situation.
3. How confident are you about your ability to do each of these things that can help someone run a successful business?

A total of 5,968 Canadian adults (aged 18 and over) participated in the study, with responses collected from all provinces (online) and territories (by telephone) between October and November 2023. The survey drew on a stratified sample, with a near-even split of 49% (n=2,899) men and 51% (n=3,022) women and an average age of 45.3 years. Geographically, respondents were primarily from Ontario (38%), followed by Quebec (23%), British Columbia (14%), Alberta (11%), the Atlantic region (7%), Manitoba (4%), and Saskatchewan (3%). The respondents' highest level of education varied: 15% had some high school or less, 16% completed high school, 10% had apprenticeship or trades training, 13% had some college or university education, and 47% obtained a college diploma or a university degree.

Regarding racial identity, a multi-select question, 71% of respondents identified as white, 10% as racialized, 4% as Black, 7% as South Asian, 5% as Chinese, and 1% as other. Additionally, about 5% of respondents identified as Indigenous, with 9% identifying as First Nations, 3% as Métis, and 1% as Inuk (Inuit). Disability status was also reported: 23% of respondents indicated having a disability that is occasionally limiting, and 14% reported having a disability that is often or always limiting. A majority (59.6%) stated they do not have a disability. About 3.4% did not specify their status.

Regarding employment status, 43% are employed full-time, 12% are employed part-time, 1% hold multiple part-time jobs, and 6% are self-employed (total: 62% employed). Among the 38% who are unemployed, 19% are retired, 5% are students, 4% are homemakers, 6% are unemployed and looking for work, 3% are unemployed and not looking for work, and 1% did not specify.



Findings

Overall

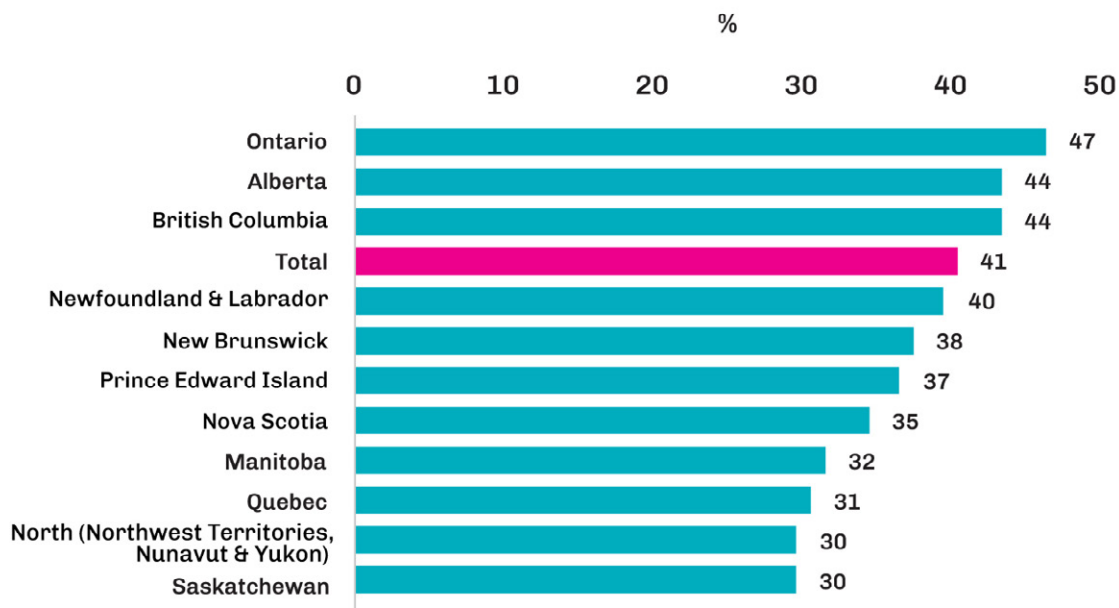
For the survey questions about the likelihood of starting a business, we excluded people who are self-employed, retired, or staying at home, which reduced the total number of respondents to 4,181. When asked how likely they were to one day start their own business, 41% indicated they were very likely or somewhat likely to pursue this path. Notably, those in the lowest income bracket showed a higher propensity (44%) to one day start a business compared to respondents in the low and middle-income brackets (both at 42%) and the high-income bracket (38%). Unemployed individuals were more inclined (43%) to express an intention to start their own business than those employed (39%). Education level also played a role, with those who completed trades being the most likely (45%) to consider starting a business, while individuals with university degrees were the least likely (39%). Regarding occupations, respondents in sales and services were the most likely (51%) to start a business, followed by those in trades, transport, and labour (42%). Professional and executive respondents (37%) and those in clerical, administrative, or office positions (33%) were less likely to indicate entrepreneurial intentions.

Regional Variations

There were some regional differences observed. Ontarians exhibit the highest entrepreneurial intent, with 47% indicating they are very likely or somewhat likely to start a business. Alberta and British Columbia follow closely, with 44% of respondents in each province expressing similar intentions. Conversely, the Atlantic and Saskatchewan exhibit the lowest likelihood of entrepreneurial aspirations, with 30% of respondents indicating they are inclined to start a new business. While Montreal is often regarded as having a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem, Quebec shows a relatively low entrepreneurial intention rate at 31%.

FIGURE 1.
Likelihood of one day starting a business by region

This bar graph shows the likelihood of the survey respondents wanting to start their own business in different provinces, with most reporting a preference for Ontario, followed by Alberta and British Columbia.



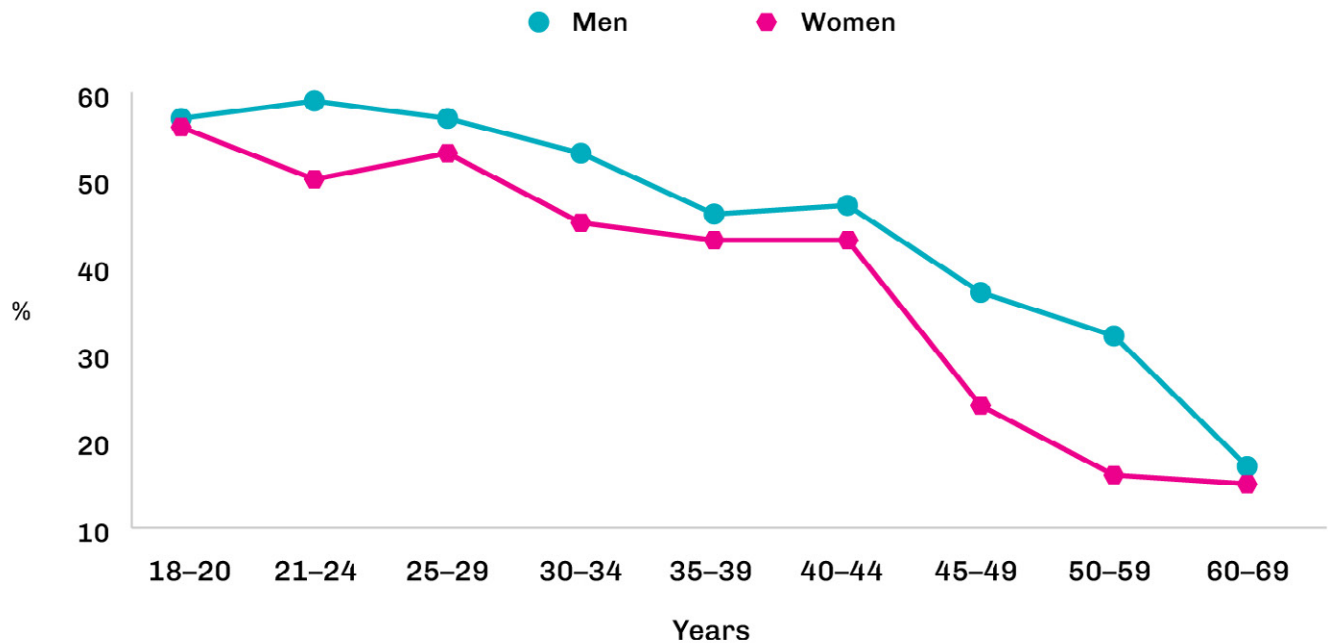
Age and Gender

On average, younger Canadians show more interest in starting a business, peaking at 56.5% in the 18 to 20-year age range. This interest drops to 49% in the 30 to 34-year age range and continues to decline from age 40 to 44 years and onward. By the 60 to 69-year age range, only about 16% of Canadians report that they are likely to start their own business.

Women are less likely than men for all age groups to report intentions of starting a business one day (38% women vs. 44% men, on average). There is a notable gap of 9 percentage points in the 21 to 24-year age range and eight percentage points in the 30 to 34-year age range. While this gap narrows in the older age brackets 35 to 44 years, it begins to widen again after age 45 years, with differences of 13 percentage points in the 45 to 49-year age range and 16 percentage points in the 50 to 59-year age range.

FIGURE 2.
Likelihood of one day starting a business by age and gender

This line graph shows the likelihood of survey respondents starting their own business by age group, for men and for women. The likelihood decreases with age for both genders, with men consistently more likely than women to start a business across all age groups.



Diverse Respondents

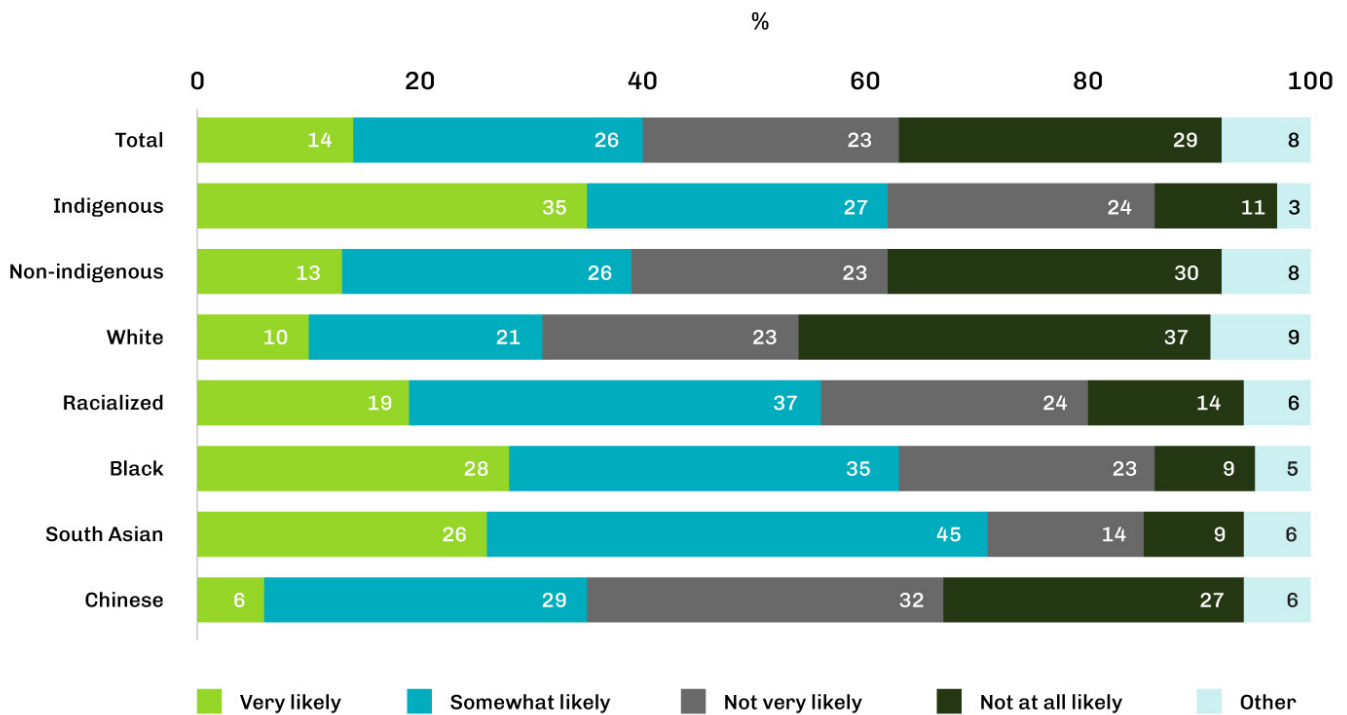
When examining immigration background, recent immigrants who have been in Canada for 10 years or less are the most likely to indicate that they intend to start a business, with nearly two-thirds (63%) expressing this intention. The interest in starting a business declines with each successive generation: first-generation immigrants report a 54% likelihood, followed by second-generation immigrants at 41%, and third-generation immigrants are the least likely at 36%.

As shown in Figure 3, Indigenous respondents are more likely to express an intention to start a business than their non-Indigenous counterparts, with a 23-percentage point difference (62% vs. 39%).

Similarly, individuals who identify as racialized are more likely to have entrepreneurial intentions compared to those who identify as white, showing a 25-percentage point difference (56% vs. 31%). Nearly three-quarters of South Asians (71%) report being likely to start a business, followed by Black individuals at 63% and Chinese individuals at 35%.

FIGURE 3.
Likelihood of one day starting a business by group identity

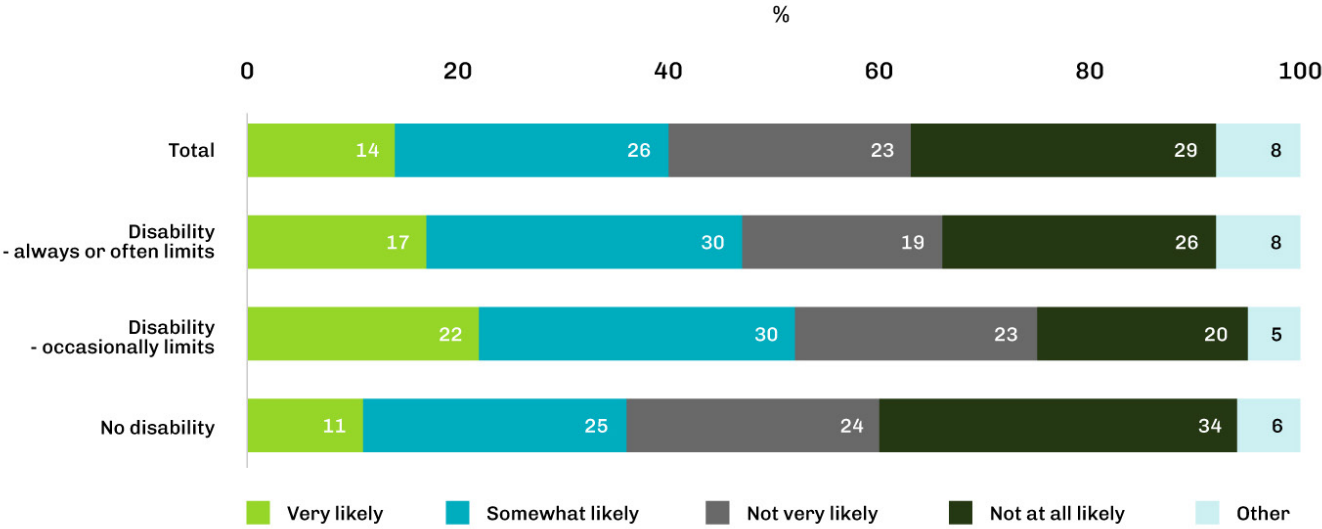
This stacked bar graph displays the likelihood of survey respondents starting their own business across different identity groups. South Asian respondents are the most likely to start a new business (when Very likely and Somewhat likely are combined), while white respondents show the lowest likelihood.



Among the survey respondents, 23% indicated that they have a disability that is occasionally limiting, while 14% reported having a disability that is often or always limiting. A majority (59.6%) stated they do not have a disability, while 3.4% did not specify their status. The entrepreneurial intent varies notably across these groups. Among those whose disability is always or often limiting, nearly one-half (47%) report that they are likely to one day start a business. The intention is slightly higher for those with occasionally limiting disabilities, with 52% expressing a likelihood of starting a business. In contrast, only 36% of respondents without a disability are likely to pursue entrepreneurship. See Figure 4.

FIGURE 4.
Likelihood of one day starting a business by disability status

This stacked bar graph shows the likelihood of starting a new business by disability status. Survey respondents with occasionally limiting disabilities have the highest likelihood to start their own business.



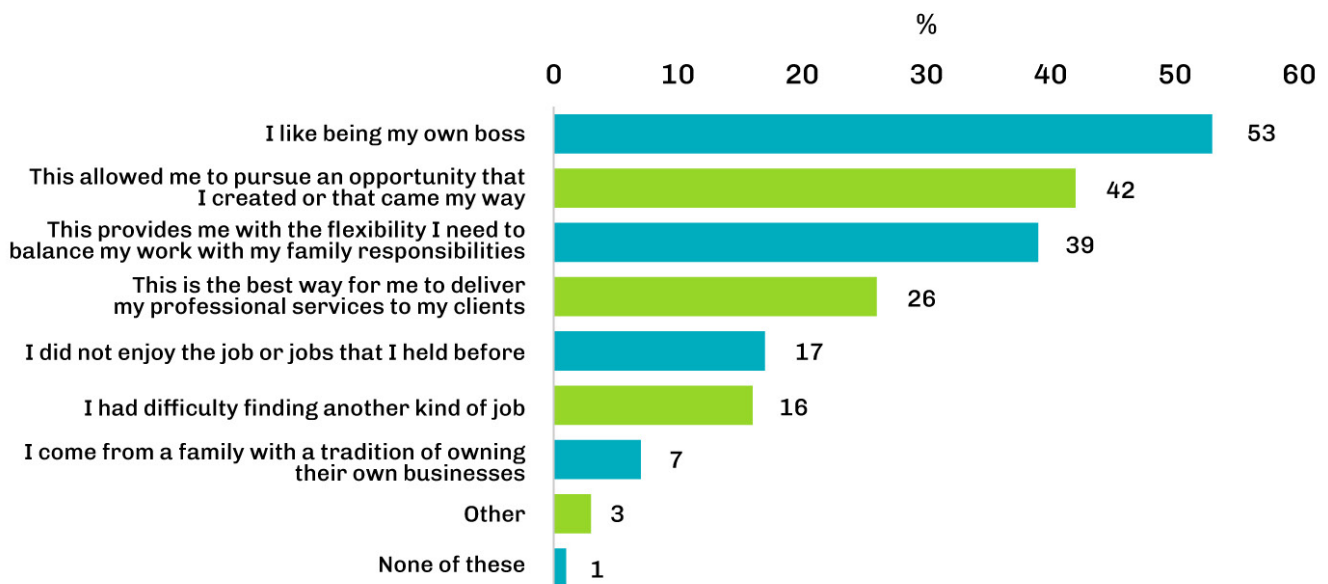
Motivations for Self-Employment

In the survey, approximately 358 people (6%) indicated that they are currently self-employed, a majority (59%) were solopreneurs, and 37% owned an incorporated business. The survey results provide a clear picture of the motivations driving individuals to choose self-employment, where respondents could select more than one reason. The desire for autonomy and control over one’s work environment appears to be a primary factor for many entrepreneurs, with more than half of the respondents (53%) indicating that they are self-employed because they like being their own boss. Additionally, 42% of respondents mentioned that self-employment allowed them to pursue an opportunity they created or encountered. Flexibility is another motivator for 39% of respondents, who stated that self-employment allows them to balance work with family responsibilities. Delivering professional services effectively is a key reason for 26% of respondents, who find that self-employment is the best way to serve their clients.

Interestingly, negative experiences in previous jobs motivate 17% of respondents to pursue self-employment. Employment challenges also contributed to the decision for 16% of respondents, who had difficulty finding other jobs. Family tradition influences a smaller portion of the population, with 7% citing a family history of business ownership as their motivation for self-employment. See Figure 5.

FIGURE 5.
Reasons for self-employment

This bar graph shows reasons for self-employment. The most common motivation for self-employment is being their own boss, while a family history of business ownership is the least common motivation for self-employment.



Interestingly, our results contrast with findings from Statistics Canada. According to the *Labour Force Survey*, women are more likely to choose self-employment to balance work with family responsibilities. However, our survey shows that 42% of men chose self-employment for this reason, compared to 36% of women. This discrepancy can be attributed to the different survey methods used. The survey asks respondents to identify the main reason for being self-employed, allowing only one response. In contrast, our *Survey on Employment and Skills* asks about all reasons for self-employment and allows multiple responses. Therefore, the extent and direction of gender differences in responses vary depending on whether the focus is on the single most important or all reasons combined.²³

Skills and Capacity

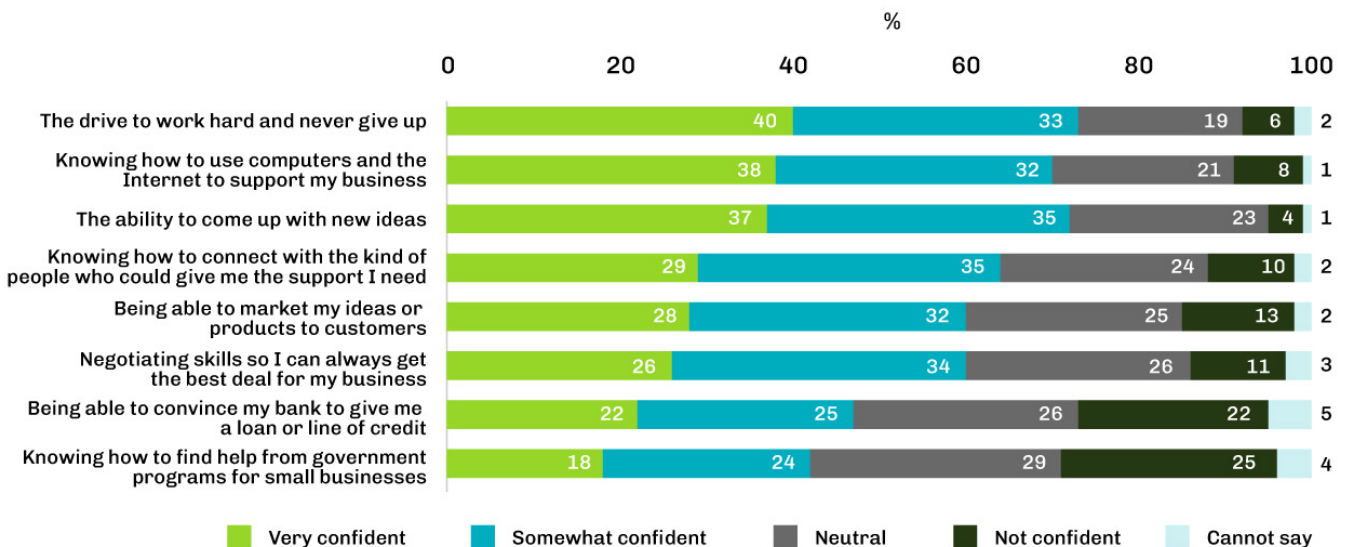
The questions on skills and capacity were asked to both those who were self-employed and those who expressed interest in starting a business. The survey results highlight a strong sense of confidence among respondents regarding their skills, indicating entrepreneurial readiness in several key areas. Notably, 73% of respondents expressed confidence in their drive to work hard and never give up. This determination is crucial, as it underpins the resilience needed to navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship. Closely following, 72% of respondents expressed confidence in their ability to develop new ideas, a skill essential for innovation and staying competitive in the market. Similarly, confidence in knowing how to use computers and the internet to support their business was cited by 70% of respondents, reflecting the importance of digital literacy in today’s business landscape.

Connecting with the right people for support was another strength, with 64% confident in their networking abilities, which is vital for building a robust support system and accessing valuable resources and advice. Marketing skills also featured prominently, with 60% of respondents confident in their ability to market their ideas or products to customers. Alongside this, negotiating skills saw 60% feeling adept at securing the best deals for their business.

However, confidence waned in areas requiring external support and formal processes. Only 47% felt capable of convincing a bank to provide a loan or line of credit, indicating potential challenges in securing financial backing. Furthermore, knowledge of how to find help from government programs for small businesses was the least confident area, with just 42% feeling knowledgeable. This suggests a need for better access to information and resources regarding government support. While the survey indicates strong foundational skills and confidence in several critical areas, it also highlights specific gaps that could benefit from targeted support and education to support aspiring entrepreneurs fully (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6.
Confidence in skills needed to run a successful business

This stacked bar graph shows how confident survey respondents are in different skills needed to run a successful business. Survey respondents are most confident in their drive to work hard and never give up, followed closely by their ability to develop new ideas. They have the least confidence in their knowledge of how to find help from government programs for small businesses.



Conclusions and Implications

The survey results reveal critical insights into the entrepreneurial landscape across Canada, highlighting regional differences, demographic and identity group disparities, strengths and gaps in skills, and motivating factors driving self-employment. These findings provide a roadmap for fostering a more inclusive and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem across Canada, ensuring that diverse groups can thrive and contribute to economic growth and innovation.

Across Canada, 41% of respondents are interested in starting a new business, with notable regional variations. Ontarians show the highest intent at 47%, followed by Alberta and British Columbia at 44%. Conversely, the Atlantic region and Saskatchewan have the lowest likelihood, with only 30% inclined to start a business. Quebec follows closely, with 31% of respondents expressing an interest in starting a new business. These findings align with RBC's Small Business Poll conducted in April 2021. In this poll of more than 2,000 Canadian adults, entrepreneurial aspirations were highest in Ontario (63%), Alberta (62%), and British Columbia (59%), and lowest in Quebec (40%).²⁴ Understanding these regional differences can help policymakers and support organisations to tailor their initiatives to boost entrepreneurship in areas where it is less prevalent, potentially leading to more balanced economic growth across the country.

The survey highlights significant disparities in entrepreneurial intentions across different demographic and identity groups. Younger Canadians are more likely to express an intention to start a business than older Canadians, and women across all age groups are less likely than men to report such intentions. Given the higher entrepreneurial intent among younger Canadians, strategies to engage and support young entrepreneurs are crucial. Entrepreneurship has traditionally been linked to business schools and startups. However, as the World Economic Forum emphasized, "school systems must prepare students to work in a dynamic, rapidly changing entrepreneurial and global environment. This requires a complete paradigm shift for academia, including changing the fundamentals of how schools operate and their role in society."²⁵ This approach involves integrating entrepreneurship into all disciplines and offering students experiential learning opportunities instead of traditional classroom-based curricula. In this regard, it is encouraging to see an increase in entrepreneurship-focused courses across various university faculties. In Ontario, for example, the average number of entrepreneurship courses per institution rose from 5.7 in 2010 to 22 in 2021.²⁶



Recent immigrants (who have been in Canada for 10 years or less) have the highest likelihood of wanting to start a business, at 63%. Immigrant entrepreneurs constitute about 33% of all business owners in sectors such as construction, professional services, health care, and retail trades.²⁷ They may be drawn to entrepreneurship due to strong entrepreneurial traditions in their cultures or pushed into it by exclusion or dissatisfaction with traditional employment opportunities. To harness their entrepreneurial potential, tailored support is essential. This includes addressing barriers such as language difficulties, lack of cultural knowledge, and limited social capital networks.²⁸ Settlement services should also focus on providing entrepreneurial assistance to meet the significant demand. Currently, they prioritize language and job search programs for immigrants.²⁹

Indigenous respondents are more likely to express an intention to start a business than non-Indigenous counterparts. Similarly, racialized individuals also show higher entrepreneurial intentions compared to those identifying as white. Persons with disabilities, whether their limitations are occasional or constant, exhibit a higher intention of starting a business than those without disabilities.

The findings show that among those who are self-employed more individuals may be “pulled” into self-employment, with the major reasons including a desire for autonomy, flexibility, and the opportunity to pursue unique opportunities. Fewer respondents cited “push” factors such as exclusion or dissatisfaction with traditional employment as their primary motivation. To effectively support these aspiring entrepreneurs, policies and programs should focus on nurturing these positive motivations.

Finally, the survey results highlight strong confidence among respondents regarding their entrepreneurial skills, with notable strengths in determination, creativity, and digital literacy. However, there are gaps in confidence related to external support and formal processes, such as securing financial backing and navigating government programs. As such, training programs focused on enhancing skills in navigating financial support programs are crucial to bridge these confidence gaps. Building robust support networks and mentorship opportunities can help entrepreneurs connect with necessary resources and advice.



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