2026

inclusive ai development

BENCHMARKING CANADA'S TECH INDUSTRY:

RESPONSIBLE PRACTICES & 2SLGBTQI+ OUTCOMES IN THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ERA

RESEARCH REPORT

QUEERTECH

Women and Gender Equality Canada / Femmes et Égalité des genres Canada
Canada

QueerTech acknowledges the support of Women and Gender Equality Canada /
QueerTech reconnaît le soutien de Femmes et Égalité des genres Canada

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INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping how decisions are made, services are delivered, and opportunities are distributed across Canada - from hiring and lending to healthcare, education, public services, and beyond. Used thoughtfully, AI can help reduce barriers, scale access, and improve outcomes. Yet without intentional inclusive design, development, and oversight, these systems can replicate and intensify existing inequities - baking bias into products, policies, and everyday experiences at unprecedented speed and scale.

This study is an important step toward understanding how inclusive AI is currently being developed and deployed across the Canadian tech ecosystem, and what it will take to strengthen responsible practices moving forward. While public attention on ethical AI has increased, practical, Canada-specific evidence about what organizations are doing day-to-day (and what is preventing progress) remains uneven. To address this gap, we surveyed technology companies across the country, small and large, to better understand current approaches to AI development and deployment, the governance structures in place, and how teams assess and mitigate potential harms across the AI lifecycle.

Our survey captures perspectives from organizations operating in a wide range of sub-sectors, product types, and levels of AI maturity. It explores how inclusion is defined and operationalized; how diverse lived experience and community input are integrated (or not) into decision-making; what policies, tools, and accountability mechanisms support equitable outcomes; and where organizations struggle—whether due to limited capacity, unclear standards, constrained data practices, insufficient expertise, or competing commercial pressures.

By including companies of different sizes and stages, this study also highlights how resources and organizational structure shape what inclusive AI looks like in practice, and where targeted supports or shared infrastructure could have the greatest impact.

The findings will help QueerTech and the broader innovation and technology ecosystem identify actionable opportunities to improve inclusive AI practice through program design, employer supports, knowledge translation, and cross-sector partnerships. This research is intended to inform practical recommendations that strengthen organizational readiness, improve internal governance, and support more equitable and transparent AI development and deployment across Canada.

Ultimately, advancing inclusive AI is not only a technical responsibility - it is a workforce, leadership, and public trust imperative. Ensuring these systems are built with care and accountability is essential to protecting communities, fostering innovation that benefits people instead of causing harm, and supporting a stronger, more competitive Canadian economy.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by QueerTech and supported by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE).

QueerTech is grateful for their support and continued collaboration.

Through this study, QueerTech's goal was to produce accurate, critical research into an under-explored & under-resourced area of Canada's technology ecosystem - ***the inclusive development & deployment of Artificial Intelligence systems***. Through this research, QueerTech has gained an informed benchmark of both the opportunities and barriers that exist across the technology industry relating to responsible AI practices, the disparity between perceived proficiency in inclusive systems design/deployment versus in-practice knowledge gaps, and actionable insights to deliver to our community and partners across the country.

By surveying **AI Developers & Product Teams**, specifically, QueerTech gains direct access to a critical stage of the artificial intelligence lifecycle - ***design, development and initial deployment*** - to better understand needed interventions and critical professional development areas, *prior to harmful systems adoption by users.*

Research Questions

We asked the following research questions in this study:

1. What is the existing approach towards inclusion, belonging and diversity in the Canadian AI ecosystem at each stage of AI product development (ideation & design, model training & testing, product monitoring)?
2. What are the current challenges that AI developers face at each stage of AI product development when addressing the needs of 2SLGBTQI+ individuals in AI systems?
3. What knowledge gaps and resource needs do AI developers have in designing systems that serve and reflect diverse users, specifically 2SLGBTQI+ communities?

Data Collection Methods

We conducted an online survey with 100 AI product developers in Canada in December 2025. Respondents work across leadership, engineering, product, operations, and responsible AI roles and are involved at multiple stages of the AI product lifecycle. The data are unweighted and drawn from multiple double opt-in panel sources. This survey follows a pilot study done in Summer 2025, that included preliminary surveys and qualitative interviews.

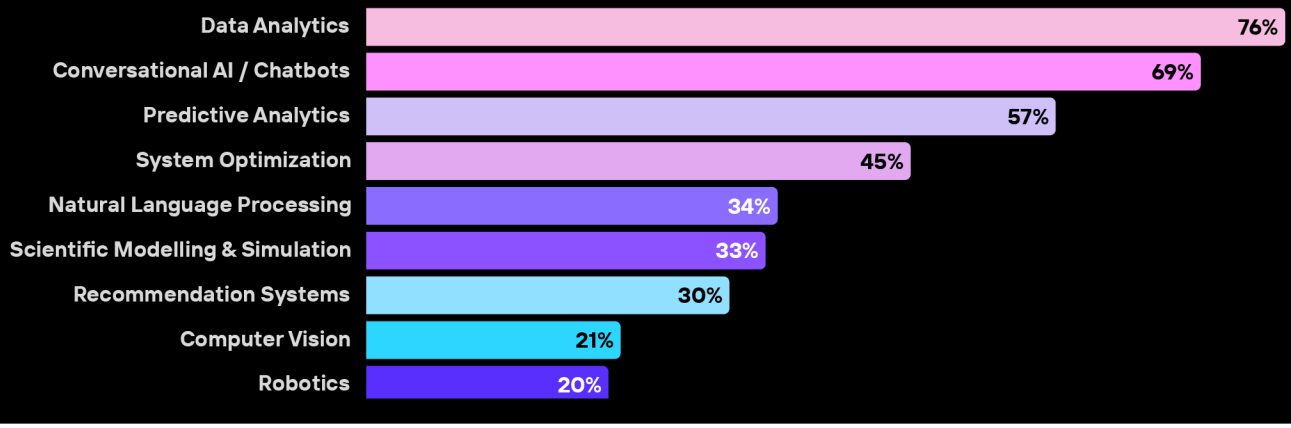
The data in this report represents a wider Canadian tech audience, versus solely AI product developers who identified as 2SLGBTQI+. This surveyed audience was selected as a way to gather insights into *perceptions* of inclusion across the sector - providing critical findings into the large disparities that exist between queer and non-queer tech professionals, in terms of their differing awareness of exclusive AI development and deployment.

WHAT TYPES OF AI ARE TECH COMPANIES BUILDING?

Background

Given the use of "Artificial Intelligence" (AI) as an umbrella term that covers a range of technologies, we first set the stage by identifying the main uses of AI being developed in Canada. The majority of surveyed AI product developers indicated they were working on AI for analytics (i.e. Data Analytics (76%), and Predictive Analytics (57%)), as well as Conversational AI (69%). Only a fifth reported working on AI for Computer Vision, and Robotics.

AI developers were asked what the **primary applications of their AI work** were.



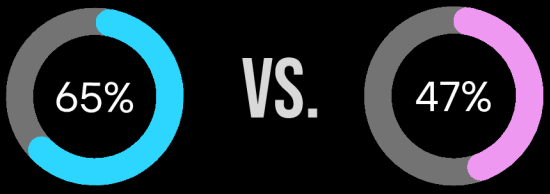
ARE THEY MEETING 2SLGBTQI+ USER NEEDS?

Key Finding

While 65% of Canadian technology companies report that their products currently meet the needs of the general population, only 47% believe the same for 2SLGBTQI+ users. This represents a disparity of nearly 20%.

We asked AI developers to assess **whether their AI products currently met the needs of the general population** compared to **the needs of 2SLGBTQI+ users**.

Meets Needs of **General Population**



Meets Needs of **2SLGBTQI+ Users**

We see this disparity in the top 3 applications of AI, with the **greatest gap in Conversational AI**:

	General Population Needs	2SLGBTQI+ User Needs	Disparity
Conversational AI	72.5%	49.3%	-23.2%
Predictive Analytics	71.9%	52.6%	-19.3%
Data Analytics	59.2%	43.4%	-15.8%

***All differences were significant at a 95% threshold using McNemar's Test for paired nominal data.*

INCLUSIVE AI: INTENTION VS. IMPLEMENTATION

Overview

97% of respondents said building inclusive and bias-aware AI was a moderate to high priority in their organization, with 94% having at least some formal processes to address potential bias. Diverse representation is also considered at least somewhat in all stages of the AI product lifecycle (Ideation & design: 93%; Model testing: 91%; Monitoring: 91%).

However, performance in key aspects of inclusive AI development is uneven, especially in: use of diverse training data (79% rated this as good/excellent); ability to test for stereotypical output (79%); and representation of gender-diverse identities (70%).

Is Inclusive AI a Priority?

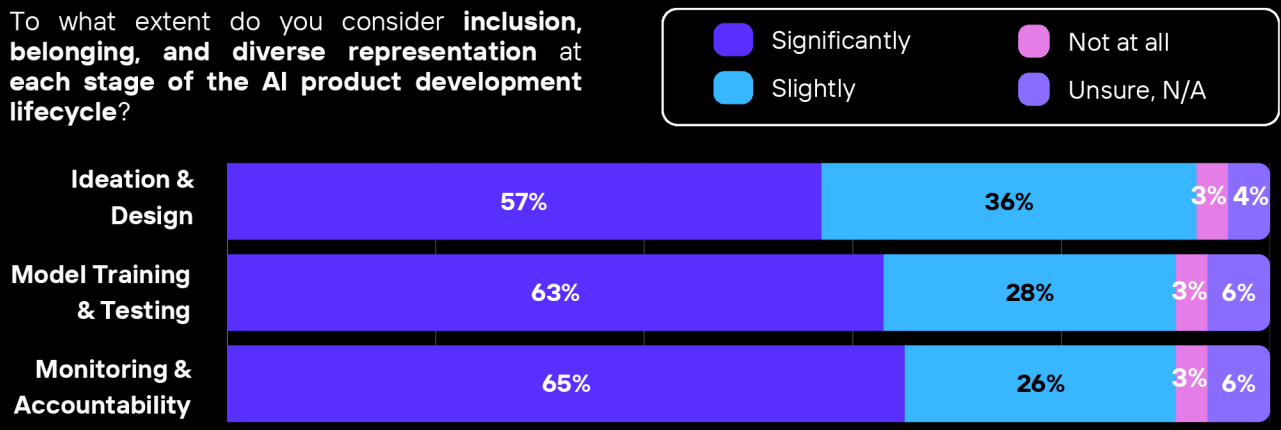
How much of a **priority** is **building inclusive and bias-aware AI** in your organization?

58%	39%	2%
High	Moderate	Low

Does your organization have **formal processes to identify and address potential biases in AI systems**?

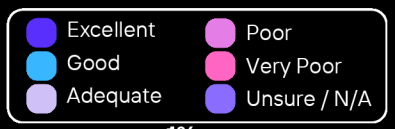
56%	38%	5%
Comprehensive	Limited	No

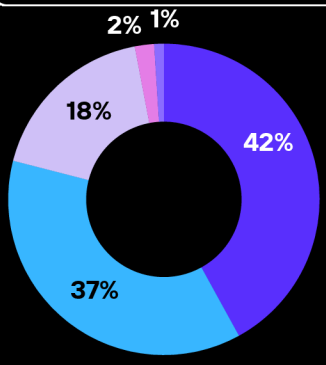
To what extent do you consider **inclusion, belonging, and diverse representation** at **each stage of the AI product development lifecycle**?



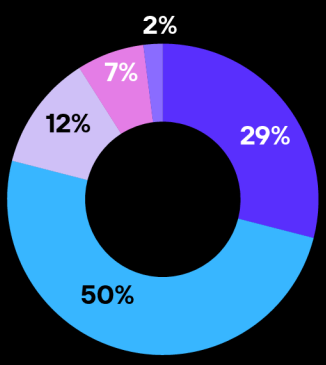
Performance in Key Aspects of Inclusive AI Development

AI developers were asked to rate their team's current performance with regards to the following aspects of AI development.

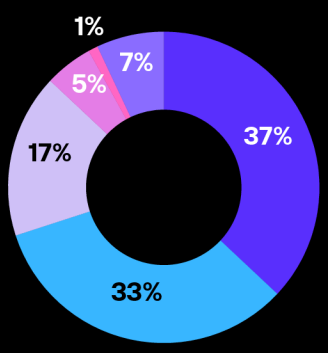




DIVERSE & REPRESENTATIVE TRAINING DATA



TESTING FOR BIASED OR STEREOTYPICAL OUTPUTS



REP. OF NON-BINARY & GENDER-DIVERSE IDENTITIES

INTENTION VS. IMPLEMENTATION - CONTINUED

Overview

Despite the commitment to building inclusive AI, less than a third of AI developers reported full organizational support for addressing equitable representation in AI systems (29%). The biggest structural challenges are: insufficient resourcing (39%); competing priorities (36%); and difficulty measuring ROI (33%). Furthermore, just under half of AI teams relied on a dedicated Trust & Safety Team for bias mitigation (48%). In most cases, this responsibility falls directly on Data Science / Machine Learning Engineering Teams (53%) or alternatively, on Product Teams (47%).

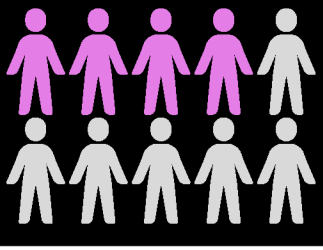
Biggest Challenges

When asked about **the level of organizational support** they receive for **addressing equitable representation in AI systems, 68% reported limited organizational support.**

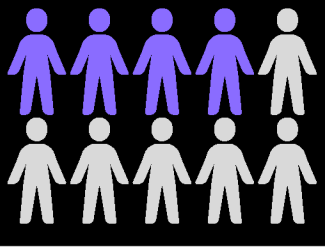
29%	68%	3%
Full support	Limited support	No support

Participants highlighted the following **top 3 challenges** experienced at work that **slowed inclusive AI development and deployment**.

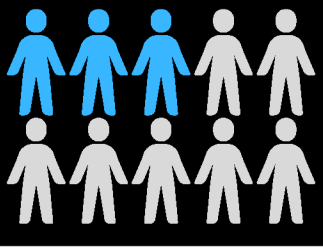
39% cited insufficient budget or resources



36% cited competing priorities

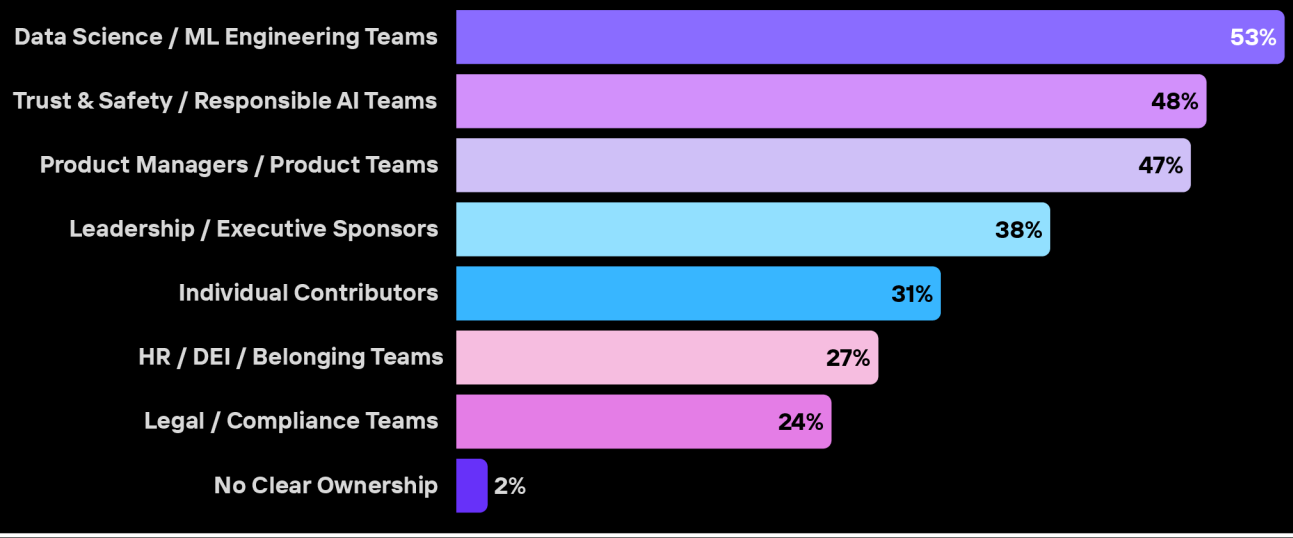


33% cited difficulty measuring ROI



Areas of Ownership: Inclusivity & Bias Mitigation in AI Systems

What **department or positions** are more likely to be **primarily responsible for bias mitigation in AI?**



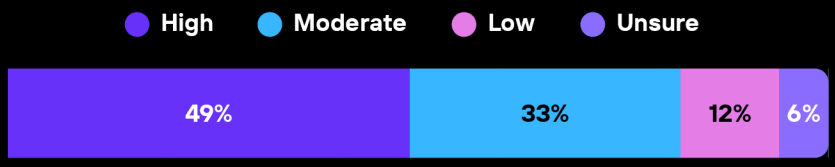
2SLGBTQI+ CONSIDERATIONS IN AI DEVELOPMENT

Overview

AI developers are not unfamiliar with 2SLGBTQI+ considerations, and report encountering gender binary assumptions in models (38%), stereotypical representations in image generation (37%), and misgendering in language outputs (34%). However, only half feel very confident in their ability to design AI systems that serve 2SLGBTQI+ users (49%), with 79-84% finding it challenging to address 2SLGBTQI+ needs at each stage of the AI product lifecycle. The most cited barriers are: fear of making mistakes (39%), lack of tools (34%) and lack of knowledge or training (33%).

Barriers

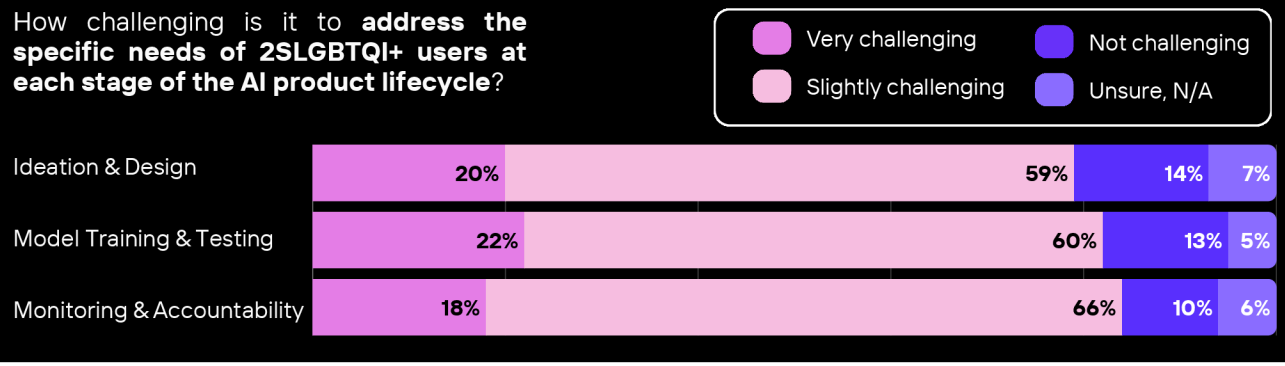
What is the **level of confidence** in your ability **to design AI systems that serve and reflect 2SLGBTQI+ users**?



Top 3 reported **barriers to applying 2SLGBTQI+ inclusive practices** in their AI work:

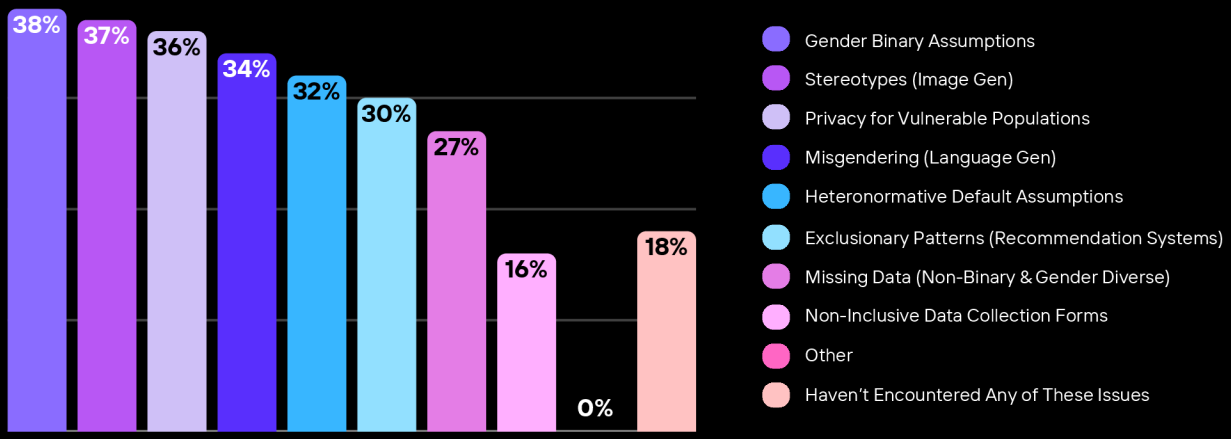
Fear of making mistakes	Lack of tools or templates	Lack of knowledge or training
39%	34%	33%

How challenging is it to **address the specific needs of 2SLGBTQI+ users at each stage of the AI product lifecycle**?



2SLGBTQI+ Considerations Encountered

Which of the following 2SLGBTQI+ considerations have you encountered in your AI work?

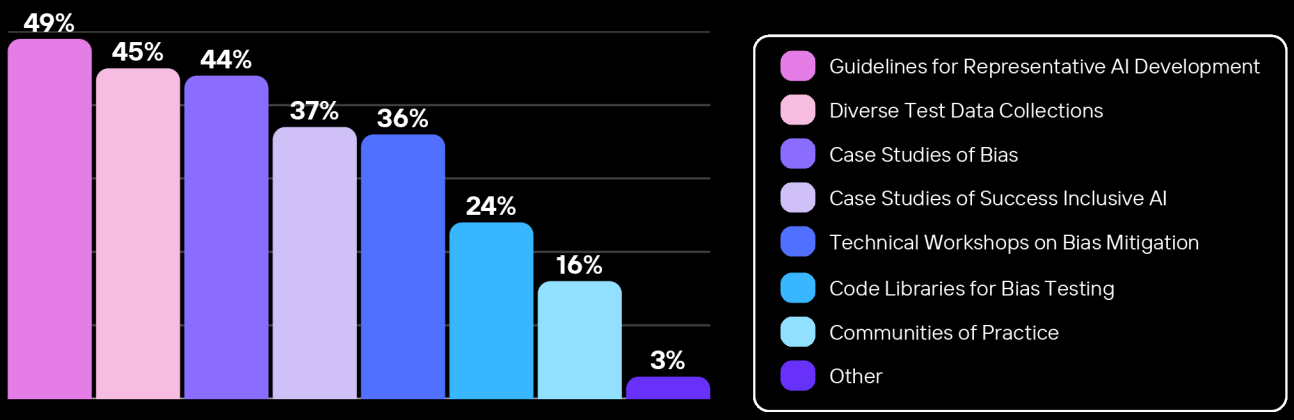


KEY RESOURCES NEEDED BY TECH COMPANIES

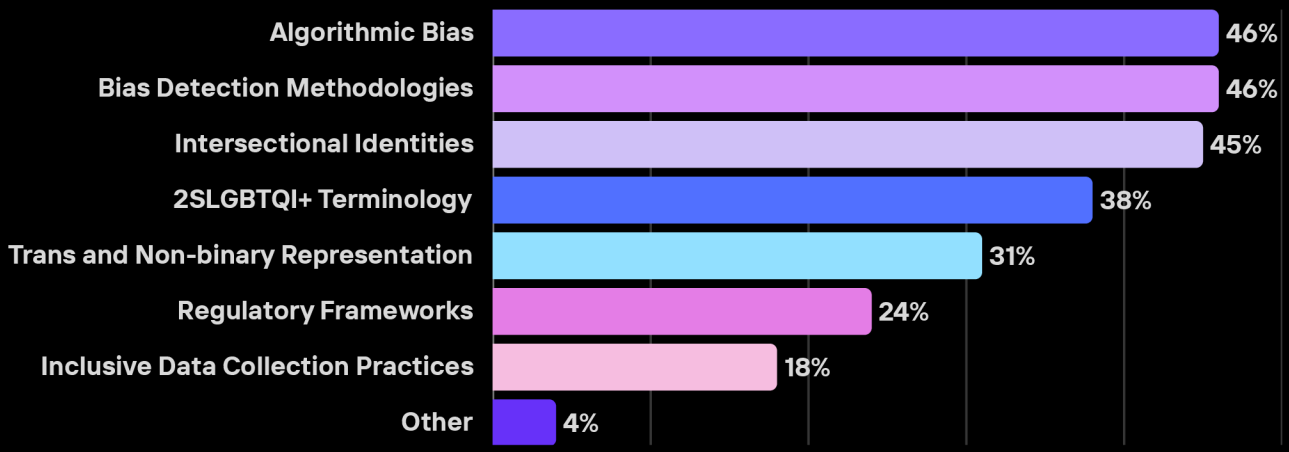
Overview

Nearly half of AI developers said they would benefit from clear guidelines for 2SLGBTQI+ representative AI development (49%), and access to diverse test data collections (45%). Many also identified the need for applied learning resources, including case studies of biased AI systems (44%) and successfully inclusive systems (37%). Demand for training similarly focuses on hands-on skills, with 46% seeking support on algorithmic bias related to gender and sexuality and testing methodologies for bias detection.

What Resources Do Tech Companies Need to Build Inclusive AI Products?



What Topics Are Most Needed by AI Developers?



What Formats Are Most Requested by AI Developers?

55% prefer **online self-paced modules**

43% prefer **in-person technical workshops**

42% prefer **series of short live online sessions**

AUDIENCE REALITIES & INCLUSIVE AI DEVELOPMENT

Navigating AI Development as 2SLGBTQI+ Tech Professionals

Inclusive AI is not an abstract policy topic for 2SLGBTQI+ tech professionals - it is about whether the systems being built across the Canadian tech ecosystem are capable of understanding diverse experiences, treating people fairly, operating responsibly, and earning trust in the environments where they are deployed. AI is increasingly shaping how products are designed, how decisions are made, how workers are evaluated, how users are categorized, and how people access support, opportunity, and visibility online and at work. When queer realities are absent from development processes, those failures do not stay theoretical. Identity, language, relationships, community context, and lived experience can be flattened into errors, edge cases, or risk signals by systems trained on incomplete data, built around narrow assumptions, and deployed without meaningful oversight. That can result in misclassification, exclusion, over-flagging, privacy exposure, reputational harm, or harmful determinations that are difficult to see and even harder to challenge.

For 2SLGBTQI+ tech professionals, this manifests in two connected ways. First, as builders, contributors, and decision-makers: queer professionals are often directly involved in designing, developing, testing, procuring, deploying, or governing AI systems inside organizations that may still lack mature standards, inclusive evaluation practices, or clear accountability. Second, as workers and community members: they may also be among those more exposed when workplace tools, hiring systems, moderation systems, or customer-facing products fail to account for identity-based realities. In that context, inclusive AI is not just about representation language or broad ethical intent. It is about whether technical and organizational practice is strong enough to anticipate predictable harms, respond to real-world complexity, and build systems that do not treat queer people as afterthoughts in the environments they help create.

Navigating AI Development as Non-Queer Tech Professionals

Inclusive AI is not a niche concern that only matters to communities most directly exposed to identity-based harm. For non-queer tech professionals, it is still a development issue, a quality issue, a governance issue, and an innovation issue. AI does not simply add efficiency - it formalizes assumptions, distributes them across products and workflows, and scales weak decisions faster than teams can manually correct. When systems are developed or adopted without clear boundaries, diverse testing, strong documentation, accessibility considerations, or post-deployment monitoring, organizations create predictable problems: brittle products, blind spots in performance, internal confusion about accountability, avoidable rework, weakened trust, and systems that succeed in controlled environments but fail in the contexts where people actually use them.

For the broader tech workforce, inclusive AI should therefore be understood as part of good professional practice, not a specialized side effort. It pushes teams to ask better questions earlier: who is this system for, what assumptions are built into it, what harms are foreseeable, how will performance be validated, who is accountable, and what happens when something goes wrong? It also improves collaboration across technical, product, legal, people, operations, and leadership functions by making responsibilities explicit rather than assumed. The strongest organizations will not treat inclusion as a final-stage communications layer or a values statement attached after deployment. They will treat it as part of how robust systems are built: with better data decisions, stronger testing, clearer governance, more realistic design assumptions, and greater readiness for the diversity of people and conditions AI systems will encounter in the real world.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CANADIAN POLICY MAKERS

The following recommendations are designed for Canadian regulators shaping AI governance, public procurement, innovation supports, workforce development, and economic resilience. They focus on strengthening Canada's capacity to develop and deploy AI responsibly and inclusively in practice - not only by addressing harm after the fact, but by establishing stronger habits, systems, and accountability from the outset. In this context, *inclusion should be understood as a condition of innovation*: Canadian technology cannot be internationally competitive or sustainable if the systems involved lack transparency, operate without proper oversight, or create the potential for exponential harm.

#	Baselines & Development Standards
1	**Baseline Standards, with Added Requirements for High-Impact Systems** Canada should require baseline development and deployment standards for all AI systems in the Canadian market, including documented purpose, data governance, inclusion and accessibility review, testing, human oversight planning, internal accountability, and transparency about limitations and appropriate use. Higher-impact systems should face added requirements, including pre-deployment impact assessment, stronger documentation, and independent or regulator-designated oversight.
2	**Required Monitoring, Logging & Corrective Action** Canada should require ongoing post-deployment monitoring for safety, fairness, accessibility, privacy, and performance failures, supported by standardized internal logging of incidents, complaints, corrective actions, and escalation steps that regulators can access through audit or investigation. Serious incidents should require formal self-reporting, while repeat failures, unresolved harms, or ongoing non-compliance should trigger disciplinary review and regulator authority to require corrective action, restrict use, suspend deployment, or mandate temporary deactivation.
#	**Incentive Structures & Accountability**
3	**Proportionate Enforcement Structures that Reflect Concentrated Power** Canada should design AI enforcement structures that reflect the disproportionate power, financial resources, systems knowledge, and market control of major technology companies. Penalties should be calibrated primarily to organizational size, resource capacity, and market strength, using tools such as revenue-linked fines, escalating sanctions, mandatory remediation, independent audits, and regulator authority to restrict, suspend, or terminate systems when corrective action is not taken.
4	**Tie Public Support to Good Practice** Canada should make responsible and inclusive AI practice a condition of public support, including grants, commercialization support, procurement contracts, tax incentives, and innovation funding. Organizations receiving support should demonstrate proportionate governance, inclusive testing, accessibility considerations, workforce training, and meaningful complaint and review mechanisms.
#	**Infrastructure & Market Guidelines**
5	**Regulate by Operating Market, Strengthen Data & Compute Resilience** Canada should regulate AI systems based on where they are deployed and where harms are felt, not only where a company is incorporated or headquartered. If a company operates in Canada, affects people in Canada, or sells AI-enabled products and services into the Canadian market, it should be required to meet Canadian rules, while Canada also strengthens domestic data and compute capacity to reduce foreign dependence and jurisdictional loopholes.
6	**Fund Shared Evaluation, Testing & Implementation Infrastructure** Canada should invest in shared infrastructure that makes responsible AI easier to operationalize, especially for startups and smaller employers. This should include public-interest evaluation frameworks, harm-testing tools, benchmark guidance, documentation templates, accessibility review supports, incident taxonomies, and model and vendor assessment resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CONTINUED

#	Workforce Readiness & Inclusion Gaps
7	**Build Inclusive AI Capability Across the Canadian Tech Workforce** Canada should invest in role-based AI capability development across the builder ecosystem, including developers, engineers, product managers, founders, executives, recruiters, procurement teams, and compliance and people leaders. Training should cover technical fluency alongside inclusive design, accessibility, data governance, identity-based harm, human oversight, escalation pathways, and responsible deployment practices.
8	**Provide Practical, Identity-Informed Guidance for Inclusive Development** Canada should support practical, identity-informed guidance for builders, especially where identity, language, accessibility, and non-binary user realities are involved. This should include implementation playbooks, public commons resources, code libraries, design patterns, documentation models, evaluation examples, and expert advisory channels that help teams move beyond default binary assumptions and narrow user models.
9	**Set Stronger Rules for AI Use in Hiring and Workplace Decision-Making** Canada should set clearer limits and obligations for AI used in recruitment, candidate screening, automated assessments, internal evaluations, and other workplace decision processes. Organizations should be required to disclose meaningful AI use in employment decisions, validate tools before use, ensure human review for consequential outcomes, and provide accessible pathways for challenge and correction.
10	**Build a Stronger Collaboration & Knowledge-Sharing Ecosystem** Canada should fund and coordinate stronger collaboration among industry, researchers, civil society, community organizations, standards bodies, employers, and public institutions so organizations are not left to solve the same governance and inclusion problems in isolation. This should include knowledge translation, recurring convening, public-interest research partnerships, case-study sharing, and ecosystem-level measurement.
#	**Tech Literacy for Canada's Public & User Protection**
11	**Invest in Data Literacy for the Canadian Public** Canada should treat data literacy as a core public-interest priority, much like digital and media literacy. Public education efforts should help Canadians understand how data is collected, inferred, reused, and operationalized in AI systems, where AI is being used, what meaningful consent looks like, and what rights or recourse avenues are available when harm occurs.
12	**Expand User Rights & Default Protections in AI-Enabled Environments** Canadian policy should more clearly prioritize user rights, safety, and agency over organizational convenience. This should include stronger protections around sensitive data use, clearer opt-in standards for privacy-sensitive AI applications, plain-language transparency requirements, meaningful rights to explanation and review, better limits on manipulative design and excessive profiling, and clearer rules for secondary data use, model training, and retention.
13	**Improve Accessible Reporting, Escalation & Corrective-Action Channels** Canada should ensure that professionals and affected communities have accessible, trusted ways to report harms, raise concerns, and trigger meaningful follow-up when AI systems cause exclusion, discrimination, privacy harms, or other adverse impacts. This should include clear escalation pathways, anti-retaliation protections, defined response timelines, documentation requirements, and expectations for corrective action and continuous improvement.

Canada's AI future will be defined by what we choose to normalize and incentivize now.

For Canadian policy makers, that means building the legal, institutional, technical, and educational conditions that make inclusive, responsible development the price of entry for those who pose to benefit from these powerful technologies. Ultimately, Canada must define the type of innovation we are proud to stand behind, and clearly identify the threshold below which tech companies become a liability to long-term competitiveness, and public trust.

CONCLUSION & URGENCY

Inclusive AI shouldn't be optional. The systems being designed and deployed today are already shaping who gets hired, who gets funded, who is flagged, who is believed, and who is left out. As AI becomes more embedded in Canadian workplaces, products, and public services, the cost of getting it wrong grows exponentially. Bias, opacity, and uneven accountability do not remain contained within an algorithm; they travel outward into policies, customer experiences, reputations, and real lives. If we do not act with intention now, we risk building a future where inequity is automated, scaled, and normalized.

This report is a call to action for everyone influencing the AI ecosystem in Canada. Inclusive AI requires more than values statements and "ethics" language - it demands consistent practice, governance, and measurable accountability across the full AI lifecycle. We call on technology companies of every size, leaders and board members, product teams, engineers and data scientists, procurement and compliance teams, investors, educators, researchers, policymakers, regulators, and community partners to take action. Move beyond performative commitments. Invest in the internal capacity to identify risk, reduce harm, and design with - and not merely for - the people most affected by these systems. Build inclusion into product requirements, data practices, evaluation methods, vendor decisions, and deployment monitoring. Make transparency and redress a standard, not an exception.

Canada has the talent and imagination to lead. But leadership in AI cannot be measured only by speed to market, model performance, or competitive advantage. It must also be measured by who benefits, who is protected, and who has power in the process. The true test of innovation is whether we can create technologies that expand opportunity without reproducing the exclusions that already exist in our institutions and industries.

The window for shaping responsible, inclusive AI is open right now, but it will not stay open forever. We can choose to embed equity, accessibility, and accountability into the foundations of AI development and deployment, before harmful patterns harden into standards. Let this report serve as both a warning and an invitation. A warning that **Tech Serves Whoever Builds It**; when people are excluded from its design we see predictable failures, lost trust, widespread harm & an industry lacking in sustainable innovation. We invite you to join us in *Queering The Tech Ecosystem* - it has never been more important.

INCIDENTAL FINDINGS & HARMFUL SURVEY COLLECTION RESPONSES

Discriminatory Responses & Challenges with Dissemination

During the analysis and dissemination stage of this research project, QueerTech and our research partners were faced with a common challenge in the area of 2SLGBTQI+ advancement research. **When formally gathering benchmarking data from Canadian technology companies, we found that 11% of all submitted responses were homophobic, transphobic, or generally queerphobic in tone**. While some of these responses were not malicious, and originated in ignorance, the remaining 6% of submissions were malicious and hateful.

It is paramount in this work to track and share the data and insights *surrounding* the research process as a whole, in addition to the findings from said projects. These are the realities 2SLGBTQI+ advancement organizations across Canada face when working at the intersections of advocacy and research collection. In addition to collecting critical, missing data caused by historical and contemporary discrimination against the queer community - directly contributing to inequitable outcomes for underrepresented Canadians - we are simultaneously tasked with a disproportionate duty of care both in terms of community protection, and data verification.

These unique factors, and the additional responsibilities that come with them, are expensive and time-consuming. When support organizations are required to verify data sources and reliability, more so than other research entities, the result is simple: less critical research, less insight for regulators, and less progress for 2SLGBTQI+ Canadians. **Increased hate and ignorance, when surveying the greater public, is a key problem statement in the use case for inclusive AI.**

These hateful comments didn't originate from bots, they originated from leaders across our national technology industry - the same people responsible for building & profiting off of the technologies Canadians use every single day.

Examples of Formally Submitted Responses

The following examples are sourced from the open-ended question *"How do you currently address non-binary gender representation in your systems?"*. Responses ranged from uncaring and dismissive, to hostile and hateful.

"Not high on our list, sounds like a DEI woke nightmare company."

"We don't address it because its a waste of time we don't care about these pronouns. This is a metal [mental] problem, not something to be addressed and concerned [about]."

"Honestly I don't think about it that much since i am not part of that stuff."

"Why would we?"

"Take the gender at birth, cis-gender."

CONTRIBUTORS

Various organizations, institutions and individuals contributed to the successful completion of this report.

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