

# BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE LIFE SCIENCES FUTURE

Inclusion • Diversity • Equity • Accessibility



## Workshop 2: Exploring How to Address Inconsistent Views about the Importance of IDEA in Canada's Life Sciences Sector

On May 23, 2023, Shift Health and Life Sciences Ontario (LSO) facilitated a half-day workshop through [Building an Inclusive Life Sciences Future \(BILSF\)](#). Inspired and informed by the outputs of the inaugural [BILSF workshop](#) in late 2021, this virtual session convened diverse stakeholders from across Canada's Life Sciences sector to share knowledge, tools and approaches that can be deployed to help Canadian Life Sciences organizations—especially small and medium-sized enterprises—make greater progress toward prioritizing and integrating inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA) within their organizations.

The workshop ignited powerful discussions focused on the progress the sector has made in IDEA, while acknowledging that collective action is required to drive durable change. Speakers discussed opportunities for IDEA to enhance Canada's innovation potential, successes and lessons learned from organizations that have committed to prioritizing IDEA, and the business case for IDEA from the investor point of view.

# Introduction

In 2021, Shift Health and LSO partnered to launch Building an Inclusive Life Sciences Future (BILSF), a series of community-driven engagements aimed at developing a vision and action plan for IDEA within Canada's life sciences sector. BILSF is guided by a Steering Committee<sup>1</sup> composed of diverse members from across Canada's life sciences ecosystem. The inaugural BILSF workshop uncovered three priority IDEA challenges in Canada:

1. There are inconsistent views about the importance of IDEA across the sector
2. Small/medium enterprises—which comprise the majority of life sciences organizations—often lack the resources and expertise to implement IDEA best practices within their organizations
3. Unconscious bias, discrimination and systemic barriers have led to chronic underrepresentation of disabled persons, Indigenous peoples, Black individuals and other people of colour and immigrants in the sector.

On May 23, 2023, nearly 100 stakeholders from across Canada's life

sciences ecosystem came together for a second virtual workshop to begin to tackle the first two challenges. While it is evident that all three challenges are important, building a consistent understanding of the importance of IDEA is a critical to establishing a common language and strong foundation for action, maximizing the likelihood of uptake and success of IDEA efforts across the sector. Further, providing solutions that are attuned to the operational realities of smaller organizations will be pivotal to driving change in the sector.

Key discussions during the workshop included the critical importance of IDEA within the life sciences sector; questions regarding how to approach Indigenous reconciliation and intersectionality; practical steps that organizations can take to advance IDEA in the workplace; and the business case for IDEA from an investor point of view. The outputs of this workshop will be built upon through follow-up engagements with the life sciences community focused on developing an action plan to assist sector stakeholders in addressing prioritized IDEA challenges.

<sup>1</sup> Aanchal Mehra, Project Manager, Virica Biotech; Brett Shannon, Medical Scientist (HIV), Gilead Sciences; Carmina Albertine Isidoro, Masters Student, University of Calgary; Eugene Fletcher, Research & Development Lead, Escarpment Laboratories; Eugenia Addy, CEO, Visions of Science; Jackie Ottmann, President, First Nations University of Canada; Justine Mallet, Healthcare Systems Partner, F. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd.; Krysta Coyle, Postdoctoral Fellow, Simon Fraser University; Mahadeo Sukhai, Director of Research and Chief Inclusion and Accessibility Officer, Canadian national Institute for the Blind (CNIB); Assistant Professor (Adjunct), Department of Ophthalmology, Faculty of Health Sciences, Queens University; Rob Henderson, CEO, BioTalent Canada; Wanda Deschamps, Founder and Principal, Liberty Co

## IDEA: The Big Picture

Speakers and panelists shared perspectives on the importance of IDEA to Canada's life science sector, the need to recognize and build on progress in IDEA, the unique role of small/medium enterprises in accelerating change, and key considerations relating to intersectionality and Indigenous reconciliation that need to be understood to lead IDEA initiatives in the Canadian context.

**IDEA enhances creativity and innovation and will help take Canada's life sciences sector to the next level.** Diversity is Canada's competitive advantage. Embracing this diversity and building a more inclusive life sciences sector will help us meet the growing demand for talent ([~65,000 additional workers needed](#)) over the next six years and will allow us to enrich our life science sector with differing perspectives and approaches to solving some of humanity's greatest problems in the areas of human, animal and planetary health.

**Although progress has been slow, Canada has advanced IDEA—we must take collective action to sustain momentum and accelerate change.**

While progress has been slow and many IDEA challenges and barriers persist, we cannot lose sight of the tremendous advances that have been made—more organizations are prioritizing IDEA, more conversations around social injustice are underway and more action is being taken to embed IDEA. Sector stakeholders can come together to build on this momentum, scale initiatives and accelerate change.

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*A wealth of information related to IDEA has been shared in a short amount of time... to me this is progress. I am a big fan of the collective impact model—if we work together, we can have a greater impact.*

**Dahabo Ahmed-Omer, Executive Director,  
BlackNorth Initiative**

**Small/medium enterprises have a critical role to play in accelerating progress in IDEA.** Small/medium enterprises (i.e. organizations of 50 employees or less) comprise [83% of Canadian companies in the bioeconomy](#).

Progress among this set of organizations has the potential to drive meaningful change and elevate the status of IDEA in the sector. While small/medium enterprises may have limited resources to put towards IDEA, they are distinguished by notable agility and the ability to rapidly change or implement new policies and best practices in IDEA to meet changing needs. Adding to this, larger enterprises in the life sciences sector that are achieving leadership in IDEA, have a powerful opportunity to collaborate with small/medium enterprises to accelerate and amplify this work.

**As we make progress toward IDEA, we must build an understanding of the context within which we are working.** Given the histories of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and our exceptionally diverse population, Canada has a unique context for IDEA work. Two complex concepts that generate a lot of uncertainty for organizations trying to prioritize IDEA are reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and intersectionality. Organizations recognize that both are important but can feel overwhelmed by

the complexity of both issues. The following sections aim to describe how organizations can start to work towards reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, and how intersectionality can be addressed in the workplace.

## **Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples**

As organizations make a commitment to truth and reconciliation, many learn that Indigenous Peoples advocate that their interests cannot be fully and meaningfully addressed under the umbrella of IDEA (e.g. strategies and initiatives aimed at supporting other equity deserving groups). While the reason for this is not always immediately clear, understanding the unique histories of Indigenous Peoples in Canada is an important starting point. Unlike any other group of people in Canada, Indigenous Peoples have Treaty rights and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples have a unique positionality within the Canadian Constitution (1982). This fact introduces a unique expectation and responsibility for organizations to address.

To take action on a commitment to truth and reconciliation, organizations can:

1. Learn about the histories and lived realities of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and incorporate this knowledge into reconciliation efforts. Reconciliation education, offered by [First Nations University of Canada](#) and



the [National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#) are good starting points to build foundational knowledge.

2. Recognize that in Canada we live and work on lands that are the traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples. This can be done by offering a land acknowledgement as part of business routines (e.g. opening remarks in board meetings, project kick-off meetings, seminars). Templates for land acknowledgments include: [Canadian Association of University Teachers \(CAUT\)](#), [Law Society of Alberta](#) and [University of Toronto Libraries](#).

A land acknowledge can be made more meaningful through the addition of non-templated reflections on the meaning of the statements to an individual or organization.

3. Commit to, evaluate, track and report on progress towards specific [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action](#) that align with the organization's mission and capabilities.

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*Respectful, mutually beneficial relationships, whose foundation is truth, is fundamental to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. To enable this, we should engage in learning that answers: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are our responsibilities? Meaningful and authentic actions speak louder than words.*

**Dr. Jacqueline Ottmann, President,**  
*First Nations University of Canada*

## Intersectionality

[Intersectionality](#) is a framework for understanding how the components of an individual's identity such as race, socioeconomic status and gender combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. For example, the experiences, power and privilege of a white woman will be very different from a white man and further different from a Black woman.

Historically, most organizations have approached IDEA by addressing equity-deserving groups independently and sequentially, often in the order of gender, and then race followed by sexual orientation. This approach has left out many other aspects of individuals' identities including disability, neurodiversity and socioeconomic status among others, potentially resulting in even more forms of entrenched exclusionary policies, processes and behaviours. This modular approach also fails to acknowledge the rich diversity of characteristics which make up any one individual.

The thought of addressing intersectionality with a modular approach can feel overwhelming given that there are myriad characteristics that make up an individual's identity, and which may have differing levels of impact on their experiences (i.e. Black women describe experiencing bias on the basis of their colour at a much

greater rate and with more impact, than their gender). Rather than focusing on one single characteristic that contributes to an individual's identity, organizations can take a human rights approach, recognizing that humanity is comprised of people with richly diverse identities who have the same rights regardless of ability or a single characteristic.

Organizations have a responsibility to ensure those rights are respected and, in so doing create environments that can ensure all individuals fulfill their potential. When taking action towards building more inclusive workplaces organizations should:

1. Hold leaders accountable for understanding the concept of intersectionality and how the interplay of characteristics that go to make our individual identities can advantage or disadvantage certain individuals in the context of the workplace.
2. Review and refine/develop new policies and practices—including but not limited to recruitment, onboarding, training, compensation, performance evaluation—that foster an inclusive workplace. Taking a human rights approach to updating a policy/practice may involve revising a compensation model to remove bias (which would benefit all employees) rather than focusing on gender pay equity (which would not consider elements of identity

such as race or disability, among others).

3. Engage employees frequently to understand their needs (e.g. one-on-one consultations, employee resource groups, regular environment scans); ensure those needs are being met and allocate resources where needed; create space for employees to request additional measures and/or resources to foster equity and support their success in the workplace.

## IDEA Action to Impact

Panelists from across the life sciences sector drew on professional experiences and discussed important actions that can be taken to accelerate meaningful impact in IDEA.

**Organizational leaders who are committed and accountable for IDEA will drive the greatest impact on culture.** Progress, durable change and positive impact on IDEA rely heavily on commitment from leadership. Key priorities for leaders include integration of the principles of IDEA into corporate strategy and demonstrating accountability to IDEA commitments by establishing metrics, tracking progress and sharing plans and progress with employees (e.g. in town halls or through internal communications).

**Leveraging grassroots passion for IDEA can transform culture and fuel positive change.** Although leadership commitment is important to embedding IDEA in culture and strategy, passion for advancing IDEA exists at all organizational levels. Leaders should embrace and support initiative among all employees to maximize positive cultural change. Expanding capacity for IDEA through grassroots interest can benefit all organizations but can be particularly helpful to small/medium enterprises, where resources are limited. Practical steps to expand capacity for advancing

IDEA include establishing platforms for knowledge-sharing (e.g. panel discussions and fireside chats) and fostering sponsorship cultures where mentors not only share experience and knowledge but are also charged with taking steps to build a mentee's visibility in the organization and create concrete opportunities for career advancement.

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*When we talk about sponsorship, we think about a senior executive as the sponsor. I think sponsorship can be created as a culture within the organization.*

**Dozie Amuzie**, Head, Johnson and Johnson Innovation-JLABS, Canada



**Reducing barriers to IDEA is mutually beneficial for employers and employees.**

Employers should aspire to be inclusive by design. Proactively identifying and addressing potential barriers to any employee's or group of employees' success in the workplace will have broad benefits for all and can fuel efforts to attract and retain top talent. This approach further removes barriers for new employees who may not have the knowledge or confidence to advocate for themselves. It is important to continue to follow-up with employees to understand if their needs are changing (e.g. the need to work from home more frequently) and/or if new technologies (e.g. assistive technologies) are available.

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*At the very beginning, have a conversation to talk about what it is going to take to set-up an inclusive space for a new employee to maximize potential and showcase the talent that will benefit the company.*

**Bowen Tang**, *President, International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People*

# The IDEA Business Case

Investors shared perspectives on why IDEA informs investment decisions and how IDEA can make companies more attractive to investors.

**It is becoming more common for investors to include IDEA in their assessment of investment opportunities.** While some investors may not appreciate the pivotal role IDEA can play in organizational performance and profitability, some venture, social impact and government funds include IDEA as part of the investment framework, including in how deals are sourced (e.g. prioritizing underrepresented founders) and in how due diligence is conducted prior to investment. For example, Telus has developed the [Pollinator Impact Navigation Tool](#), which incorporates IDEA principles to ensure alignment between the fund's strategy and the companies receiving capital (beyond financial and performance metrics). Similarly, BDC Capital launched a standardized [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion \(DEI\) Reporting Template](#) for

Canadian general partners (GPs) and their portfolios. The new framework captures metrics related to gender, race, ethnicity and identification in a way that aligns with the Canadian market and can be used as guidance for organizations that are seeking funding.

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*The minute you ask someone to track and report on metrics, all of a sudden that puts a spotlight and some attention on the issue and that is often times all you need to drive action.*

**Brenda Hogan**, Chief Investment Officer,  
Venture Ontario

Governments are increasingly applying an IDEA lens to funding programs (e.g. [Strategic Science Fund](#)), and economic development loans and grants (e.g. [FedDev](#), [Industrial Research Assistance Program](#)). Federal funders have also launched programs to promote the adoption of IDEA (e.g. [Venture Capital Catalyst Initiative](#) with \$50 million to support funds led by equity deserving groups).

**Investors view integration of IDEA into products, teams and business practices as a competitive advantage.**

When assessing IDEA as part of an investment decision, investors that prioritize IDEA view integration of IDEA throughout an organization as a strength. This includes incorporating IDEA in areas such as product design and development, marketing, risk management, partnerships and philanthropy. A diverse management team may also have an advantage when trying to understand and serve diverse customers, identify and mitigate risks and facilitate connections to new strategic partners. As such, companies that demonstrate action to embed IDEA principles into their business, and develop, track and report on IDEA metrics can be more competitive in funding competitions and when attracting capital.

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*Businesses need to embed IDEA into operations as well as product development, design and research... At the end of the day, IDEA makes better products and better services.*

**Wendy Cukier, Founder & Academic Director of the Diversity Institute**

## Next Steps

Building on this workshop, BILSF will now bring attention to:

- Conducting focus groups with members of Canada's life sciences community to gather perspectives to inform an action plan for addressing Challenges 1 and 2.
- Developing and publishing the action plan for Challenges 1 and 2.
- Beginning the process for understanding and addressing Challenge 3.

## Presenting Organizations



## Sponsoring Organizations



*Presenting Organizations: Shift Health and Life Sciences Ontario (LSO)*

*Sponsoring Organizations: Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and  
Johnson & Johnson Consumer Health*