Recognizing Black History Month

Leaders across multiple industries and sectors highlight continued efforts that support Black success across Canada.

Nico Taylor & Queen Kukoyi
Executive Director of Communications & Executive Director of Operations, Black Speculative Arts Movement Canada

As a Toronto-based cultural arts non-profit and a collective of multidisciplinary artists and art educators, the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) Canada is interested in changing how society connects, relates, and engages with public art and space. It’s an organization that truly values community participation in its art-making practices and believes that it should be more of a focus in arts and cultural spaces. BSAM Canada’s approach to speculative art involves the ability to reimagine constructions of race that place limits on our participation in Canadian society and to envision alternative worlds where we set the foundation for the society we would like to live in. The BSAM Canada team believes Black History month and Black Future month, and every day of the year, should elevate the way that public art can speak to the processes of establishing a more equitable city while expanding the imagination through creating art that discovers other narratives and reverberates joy.

Andrine Ormsby
Director of Professional Practice and Quality, Across Boundaries

Across Boundaries believes that Black mental health matters this month and every month. The organization is helping Black people who use its services to create Black history. Across Boundaries is a mental health centre providing support for Black and racialized people since 1995. It recognizes that systematic racism impacts the physical and mental health of Black and racialized people, and offers a diverse spectrum of mental health services based on anti-racism, anti-Black racism, and anti-oppression frameworks. It provides a wide range of holistic programs to enhance the mind-body connection, including meditation, yoga, nutrition, employment, and much more. They're all free and available online for Black and racialized people. Across Boundaries is not only changing the landscape from within — it also recently hired a new Anti-Oppression/ Anti-Racism Training Manager who will begin educating outside groups on how to combat anti-Black racism in their workplace.

Camesha Cox
Founding Director, The Reading Partnership

There have always been Black advocates and leaders responding to and addressing the challenges Black communities face with ingenuity and creativity. During Black History Month and beyond, it’s important to acknowledge and support Black leaders and their initiatives to ensure sustainability and growth. For a decade, The Reading Partnership’s work has been shaped by Black women educators who have worked collectively to develop evidence-based programs to address local issues of literacy. The organization is proud to see these initiatives, incubated in East Scarborough, being scaled nationally to serve children and families in need of support across the country. This is Black Girl Magic at its best!

Meagan Bennett
Founder, The Black Outreach Collective

Strong identities enhance personal character, and an enhanced character can allow one to pursue their purpose. As a born leader growing up in one of the most marginalized communities in Canada known as Jane and Finch, I was a part of a generation of Black youth and young adults who needed to be equipped with the right mindset to thrive in this country. I started the Black Outreach Collective, a Black young adult-led non-profit organization with a mission to reach, enhance, and educate Black youth and young adults aged 18 to 35. We provide Afrocentric socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical education and tools of radical knowledge via our digital platforms. Black history and culture are relevant to who we are. To become community catalysts, we must act with a full understanding of the past, our history, the present social interface, and an equitable future. It starts by navigating with knowledge that revolutionizes our nation.

Meagan Bennett
The road to Black business development in Canada must and should go through Nova Scotia.

The BBI has been the steward of that success. D.F. McCourt has been the steward of that success. Nova Scotia’s Black Business Initiative has been associated with Natural Butter Bar.

The BBI was my “go to” 15 years ago with my first business. We needed something to help us cover our debts. The BBI has been instrumental in helping us.

Owner, Natural Butter Bar

As a small business, it can be challenging making connections and knowing whom to turn to when you need guidance. The BBI’s support has made that challenge easier to manage.

We’ve been associated with the BBI since its inception in 1996. We’ve been impressed with the organization’s growth, ways, and success over the years in fostering a dynamic Black business presence in Nova Scotia.

The BBI has helped to discuss strategy and make introductions to key stakeholders, and has offered opportunities that increased my exposure, network, and revenue.

We’ve benefited significantly from the opportunities that the BBI has presented to us over the years. The organization’s efforts on our behalf, with promoting us to parastatal, financial, and business stakeholders locally and internationally, are commendable.

The success of Nova Scotia’s Black business community is integral to the prosperity of Nova Scotia as a whole. And for 25 years, the BBI has been the steward of that success.

The road to Black business development in Canada must and should go through Nova Scotia.

Two and a Half Decades On, Nova Scotia’s Black Business Initiative Is Going Strong

The Black business community in Nova Scotia, it was important to ensure that Black voices and Black potential are fully elevated and the promise of Nova Scotia’s future. It was the lead for the Black business community and the province. In 1999, a cadre of enterprising Black leaders formed a task force to organize that community in an official capacity. One year later, the BBI was born.

"There have always been attempts to be more inclusive of the large historic African Nova Scotian communities and get them engaged in the economy," says Rustum Southwell, CEO and founding member of the BBI. "In the environment and political climate of the '90s, the community and many groups started to think more about what business development and, by extension, economic development, could look like. The minimum and vision was to foster a vibrant and dynamic Black presence within the business community, meaningful the mainstream community. In the first five years, we set out to start 60 new companies, which we did.”

Funding is just one ingredient in the recipe for success. Without funding where funding and lending were the two primary tools being used to promote growth, the BBI recognized that the true nature of the need was much broader. “Business is difficult,” says Southwell. “It takes more than money. I always say that the problem is money, but money isn’t the real problem.”

Without funding, the deeper issues couldn’t be resolved, but money alone also wouldn’t solve them. And so, while the BBI did work diligently on the financial side of business development, it focused also on underserved domains like skills development, networking, and technology. The results within the Black business community of Nova Scotia were truly astounding. It wasn’t just mom and pop businesses being empowered either — roughly 60 percent of these new businesses were creating new employment for the community as well. Word quickly spread that something amazing was happening in the Atlantic province. Since the StatCan report came out showing the scale of the impact, folks really stood up and took notice,” says Southwell. “We started seeing folks coming out from Ontario to look at our model. People realized that there was merit in the work we were doing.”

A new era of Black business

In the decades since, many things have changed in Canada, in Nova Scotia, and in the Black community. But, through it all, the BBI has continued to foster and support growth and innovation. “Our journey has not been a straight line upward,” acknowledges Southwell. “It’s cyclical.” But it’s a cycle with a steady trajectory toward opportunity and prosperity.

Today, the work of the BBI remains as important as ever, though it exists in a dramatically different landscape. Southwell points to the proliferation of high-quality agencies and support structures that today’s Black business community can leverage, and how encouraging this is compared to a few decades ago. He points to the incredible growth in the amount of capital controlled by Black organizations, and the positive implications that has for opportunity. He recalls that, in 1996, the budget of the BBI was just nine million dollars per year for the entire province and he recognizes how much larger: the funding opportunities have grown, but none of that means the work is done.

Black businesses and Black entrepreneurs still face an array of systemic barriers, and the initiatives of the BBI today are laser focused on the real needs of the community on the ground. After 25 years, it has gotten unbelievably good at identifying the optimal ways to create cultural change, such as with its Business in Jamaica (BIIJ) youth entrepreneurial initiative. “I realized, when I was in my 40s, that if I wanted to change the culture, I probably needed to start with people younger than myself,” says Southwell. “We need to get them as soon as eight or nine years old because, in ten years, that kid could be the next Bill Gates, or see EU as one of the keys to changing the environment, and it’s already doing.”

Other BBI initiatives include the Diversity Employment Network, the Supporting Black Canadian Community Initiative, and the Black Entrepreneurship Program, each a carefully crafted key designed to unlock a specific gate to greater Black prosperity in Nova Scotia.

From a Southwell’s perspective, Black prosperity in Nova Scotia is no less unique. The road to Black business development in Canada is hard, but more inclusive, and fosters economic development and, by extension, economic development, job creation and productivity.

Tiffani Young

Owner, Natural Butter Bar

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Owner, Eunoia Lifestyle Shop

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It’s Who You Know
The Network Gap Among Black Tech Professionals

Highly educated, brilliantly talented, relentlessly motivated Black professionals continue to face invisible barriers to advancement in the tech industry. Is the root of the problem a network gap?

Our years ago, Lekan Olawoye, then an executive at MaRS Discovery District, was giving a talk in Toronto to a large group of Black professionals at LinkedIn. After his session was finished, he was approached by four young Black attendees. They wanted to know how Olawoye had made it to the executive level in the tech industry, where Black career growth is so often glacially slow. All four related stories of trying to move up, of wanting to make an impact, but seeing their counterparts from other communities continuously accelerate past them.

“I just broke my heart,” says Olawoye. “These were amazing young professionals, talented souls, and they were just getting stuck.”

Over-credentialled and undernetworked
Within a few months, Olawoye had organized another session back at LinkedIn, specifically addressing the power of networking and connection for Black tech professionals. The session sold out completely, generating a waitlist of over 200 people long. Black Professionals in Tech Network (BPTN) was born. Today, with Olawoye as CEO, the network has grown to over 50,000 members across North America.

The tremendous appetite for an organization to fill this space sparked closely on a substantial void in the collective conversation up to that point. In trying to address a lack of representation, Olawoye holds, the tech industry had been too focused on symptoms and not enough on the underlying cause.

“The symptom is that we don’t have enough Black tech talent, or that we can’t retain Black talent,” says Olawoye. “There are more opportunities for Black professionals now, and there are a lot of companies actively looking for and wanting to hire Black professionals, but they aren’t finding them. That’s a symptom. The real problem is a network gap.”

It’s not a lack of people, but a lack of connections between them. There’s a lack among People of Colour that a given White North American, the kind of person historically making hiring decisions in technology, is using their familiar Black friend. Today, social networking data has made clear just how much truth that jest holds, as well as other stories. Social networking data has made clear just how much truth that jest holds, as well as other stories.

Is the root of the problem a network gap?

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Highly educated, brilliantly talented, relentlessly motivated Black professionals continue to face invisible barriers to advancement in the tech industry. Is the root of the problem a network gap? For Black professionals, for White professionals, for everyone,” explains Olawoye. “These networks are built informally at different watering holes in industry, and if you aren’t there in those spaces, if you can’t find them, how do you build your network?” If we solve the network gap, we solve all the other things.

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Harnessing some of the best minds in the tech sector, BPTN has come up with what Olawoye calls a “tech solution to a business problem with social outcomes.” That solution is obsidi.com, a platform that enables Black professionals to connect with other Black professionals, but also critically with companies and other business communities at scale. For those making hiring decisions, if you have a platform but that’s an “all Black friend” into a global network of Black professionals.

“We need to ensure that we’re not siloing our networks, and this is what happens,” says Olawoye. “obsidi.com is by Black people, but it’s not just for Black people. It was created to solve the networking for Black professionals, but the networking exists because White professionals and other professionals aren’t connected with the Black community. So if we create a space exclusive to Black people, we’re not solving the problem. Instead, we’ve created a Black space, a house built by Black professionals, but where everyone is welcome to come eat, sleep, and engage.”

“Like coming home”

If it’s a gap outcome from an idea sparked at a LinkedIn session, to have so many clearly through to how and why existing networking tools weren’t meeting all the needs of the Black professional community. But obsidi.com isn’t designed to replace the social networking tools people already use, but rather to augment them. “You should still be on your other platform, where you can engage with the whole world,” says Olawoye. “But when you want to make a strategic connection or have a congruous conversation, you need to be on a networked scale. obsidi.com is like coming home. You come to obsidi.com and ask your tribe.”

For at the heart of the entire initiative is the database, despite all the practical concerns of industry, business connections are very human and very personal. “We’re tribal creatures, and our tribes are stories that self-organize, and with the right tools we can converse them. When you sign up or sign in to obsidi.com, no matter who you are, you’re helping shift the narrative of what professional networks look like,” says Olawoye. “And the moment you change the narrative, you change the world.”
Uncovering the Deep Historic Impact of Remarkable Black Canadians

BLK: An Origin Story elevates the unsung heroes who substantially contributed to Canada’s nation building and to Black Canadian history.

Jennifer Holness
Executive Producer, BLK An Origin Story

Tania Amardeil
Executive Producer, BLK An Origin Story

The Federation of Black Canadians (FBC) is a national, not-for-profit organization that advocates for and creates opportunities for Black Canadians in the financial sector. FBC is committed to continuously expanding the visibility of Black Canadians and their contributions fully participating in society. PIP strengthens the systemic barriers that restrict Black Canadians from actively work with companies within each industry to identify barriers that Black Canadians face in the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

FBC’s national network in action

Partners in Principle (PIP) is FBC’s national network of over 200 Black-led businesses and not for profit. This community allows FBC to bring pertinent business needs, provide capacity-building support, increases awareness of its products and services, and collect valuable input for innovative projects. Anti-Black racism is still prevalent throughout industries and reinforces systemic barriers that restrict Black Canadians from fully participating in society. PIP strengthens the visibility of Black Canadians and their contributions across sectors in Canada by cultivating a place to share ideas, enable change, achieve goals, and support each other in collective growth.

Improving Economic Security for Black Canadians by Creating Opportunities in Banking and Finance

Through the Barriers to Employment and Anti-Black Racism toolkits, the Federation of Black Canadians advocates for and creates opportunities for Black Canadians in the financial sector.

Sabrina Seecharran

This Black History Month, The History Channel® is launching a new limited docuseries called BLK: An Origin Story. Premiering on Sunday, February 26, the four-part series delves into the untold story of Black people in Canada and their legacy, revealing the deep historic impact of Black presence in Canada and the remarkable Black Canadians whose stories have previously been unacknowledged. From the west coast to the east coast, BLK: An Origin Story takes viewers across Canada and shares riveting, enduring, and multifaceted historical Black Canadian narratives.

An award-winning team BLK: An Origin Story is produced by award-winning production team Hungry Eyes Media in association with Corus Studios for THE HISTORY Channel, and created by award-winning executive producers Jennifer Holness and Sudz Sutherland. The series features some of Canada’s best-known and under-known experts of Black Canadian history, including authors, academics, musicians, historians, community leaders, activists, and elders.

“I think the time is right for this kind of a series.”

Jennifer Holness
Executive Producer of BLK: An Origin Story

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