



BUSINESSLINK

ANNUAL REPORT 2019-20





Backgrounder

Business Link is Alberta's entrepreneurial hub. We are a nonprofit organization that helps people navigate the steps toward starting their own businesses. We provide one-on-one support and guidance, market research, access to experts, training, networking opportunities, and specialized support for Indigenous entrepreneurs.

We're a small but mighty team that has a passion for small business.

Helping small business owners isn't new to us—we've been doing it since 1996. We wouldn't be able to do what we do without the funding support of the Governments of Alberta and Canada.

Business Link today

Business Link provides customized business advice and support for entrepreneurs navigating starting, running and growing their own businesses. They provide one-on-one support and guidance, market research, access to experts, training, networking opportunities, and specialized support for Indigenous and immigrant entrepreneurs. Business Link strives to provide support services that will drive the growth of successful Alberta Businesses.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 1, 2020

Small Business Support: Business Link 2019-2020 Annual Report is now Available

Alberta (October 1, 2020) – Business Link’s Annual Report for 2019 - 2020 gives a snapshot of the many milestones achieved by Business Link over the past year. The report showcases several clients Business Link worked with last year, programming delivered, and dives into the reach Business Link had across the province to provide small business advice and support. It shows too, the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and how Business Link continued to support entrepreneurs and business owners through the unprecedented time in the Alberta economy, quickly and efficiently.

“What I can say is that I am incredibly proud of our entire team, in a year of change they responded to the COVID 19 challenge with tremendous grace under pressure and displayed incredible professionalism, dedication and enthusiasm,” says Barbara McKenzie, Business Link CEO. “The work that Business Link does in the Alberta entrepreneurship community is invaluable, and there are so many opportunities for us to expand our reach and our partnerships, and we really worked towards that over the last year,” says McKenzie.

In the past year, Business Link developed a one-of-its-kind program, a Self-Employment program, in partnership with SAAMIS and Community Futures Treaty 7. Business Link also spent the year hosting several networking events focused on everything from *Business for the Common Good* to *Personal Wellness and Business*, as well as hearing from prominent entrepreneurs Wayne Chiu and Ashif Mawji, and rounding out the year with *Learning from Challenges and Successes*, and *Financial Survival for Entrepreneurs*. In addition to programming and events, Business Link updated website offerings to best support entrepreneurs including launching a COVID resource page at the end of the fiscal year.

Board chair Chad Saunders recognized the commitment the team of Business Link has to small business and entrepreneurship in Alberta, “At Business Link, we have been here to support you for nearly 25 years, and we will continue to help Alberta businesses grow, prosper and build into the future,” he says.

The annual report website can be viewed [here](#), with more information about new program launches and details on all Business Link outreach.

Business Link is a non-profit organization established in 1996 and is jointly funded by the Government of Canada and Government of Alberta . To access Business Link services, contact 1-800-272-9675 or visit www.businesslink.ca.

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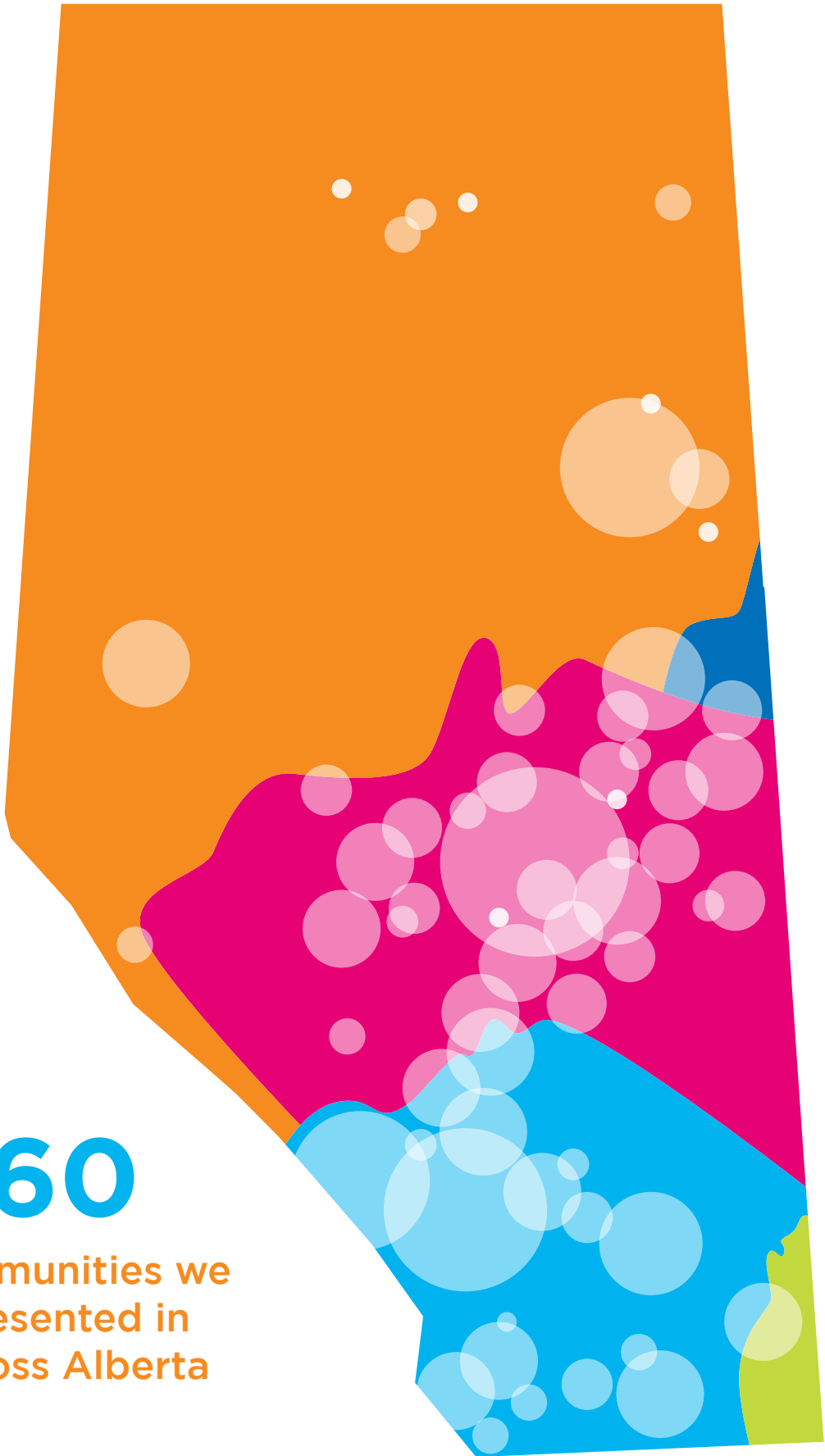
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About Business Link:

Business Link provides customized business advice and support for entrepreneurs navigating starting, running and growing their own businesses. provide one-on-one support and guidance, market research, access to experts, training, networking opportunities, and specialized support for Indigenous and immigrant entrepreneurs. Business Link strives to provide support services that will drive the growth of successful Alberta Businesses.



60

Communities we
presented in
across Alberta

Business Link Annual Report 2019-20: Message from the CEO

2020, WOW what a year it has been. On June 10, 2019 I started at Business Link, proud to be the newest member and leader of such an amazing organization. Over the course of 2019-20 a lot of changes have happened, but never did we think that the last two weeks of our fiscal 2019-20 year would present us with the biggest challenge and change we have ever seen as an organization or as a world.

What I can say is that I am incredibly proud of our entire team, in a year of change they responded to the COVID-19 challenge with tremendous grace under pressure and displayed incredible professionalism, dedication and enthusiasm.

But let's take a step back and talk about the year that was before COVID-19. The work that Business Link does in the Alberta entrepreneurship community is invaluable, and there are so many opportunities for us to expand our reach and our partnerships, and we really worked towards that over the last year. As any new leader to an organization does, I took a critical look at the organization with the outsider's lenses, and with my deep knowledge of the entrepreneur landscape and the entrepreneurial experience, looked at our team, our work and our communities for areas where we could revise and improve services. We also looked at some of the things we did and really challenged ourselves on whether we wanted to continue to do them.

So, what did we accomplish in 2019-20, well as you will see in this report we did amazing work with outreach and entrepreneurship support, but we also did things that no one sees or understands that make an incredible difference to how we support entrepreneurs. Here are just a few of those things:

1. We updated our IT infrastructure, moving all our systems into the cloud to increase access anywhere, anytime. As 50% of our team works remotely and from all over Alberta, this was vital to our ability to continue to grow and service entrepreneurs where they are when they need it.
2. We implemented new systems for tracking and accountability and integrated them for seamless service to our entrepreneurs and our staff. Our new CRM allows us to track the full client journey and integrate with all our social media and marketing platforms so we can track how and when our clients interact with us and serve them better. Our new HRIS, expense and project management platforms allow us to better manage our team internally, increase productivity and enhance tracking and accountability.
3. We built out new policies for working at home and working remotely. Having these in place in late 2019, helped us make the transition to working from home when COVID hit so much easier.



4. We increased our capacity to deliver customize programming. We decided to work with service providers and entrepreneurs to understand their needs, and then partner to create customized workshop that are developed on-demand to meet entrepreneurs' needs when they need it.
5. We built out a new organization structure and increased our leadership capacity, creating cross-functional teams and building performance management systems that give staff clear direction, action and attainable goals to make their jobs easier and them more productive.

And that is just a few of the initiatives that we undertook to meet the needs of entrepreneurs in the best way possible.

Finally, I want to comment on Business Link and our belief in diversity. Current events have shown more than ever before that there is no level playing field and that diversity is not valued by all people and in all circumstances. I would like to say that at Business Link, we don't just pay lip service to diversity. Many of our team members have experienced firsthand racism, and in the face of it all, they are still optimistic, hardworking and believe in the good in people. I am proud that I lead an organization the truly walks the talk when it comes to diversity. We are a diverse group of people from all walks of life – women, men, of different ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, religion and sexual orientation – and at the core of our beliefs and what we practice every day is the value that this brings to our organization. The different experiences each one of us brings, the recognition that we need to address these in what we do, the respect we have for each other and where we come from. I am proud that we as an organization can stand up and say we reflect the diversity in our society and we treat everyone with respect, equality and consider the experience and the person not colour, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

Finally, it cannot be said enough that without the support of our funders, the Government of Canada, Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Western Economic Diversification and Government of Alberta, Jobs, Economy and Innovation, we would not continue to be able to service entrepreneurs. Their ongoing support for almost 25 years has made a significant difference to Alberta's entrepreneurs, and we look forward to working with them for many more years as we work through the challenges that COVID-19 has put before us and Alberta entrepreneurs.



Thank you also to our board for their ongoing support, dedication and time to be involved with Business Link and their continued dedication to Alberta entrepreneurs.

Barbara McKenzie
CEO, Business Link



Business Link Annual Report 2019-20: Message from the Chair

2019-20 has been a series of exciting, new and disruptive events for Business Link. Early in 2019, we began the search for a new CEO, and in June 2019 we brought in Barbara Engelbart McKenzie to guide Business Link into a new phase of its evolution.

Our board has been working diligently to ensure that Business Link maintains its reputation for service delivery, excellent partnerships and strong relationships with funders. We have focused our governance efforts on ensuring that Business Link is financially sound and continues to provide strong value to its funders and clients.

We know that the future will be different, and that we must continually evolve, now more than ever, but Business Link will continue to grow its brand as the number one resource for start-ups, entrepreneurs and small businesses across Alberta. Indeed, we are proud to be the only Alberta-wide provider to serve so many diverse communities. Our Indigenous programming has been strong for 10 years and has experienced tremendous growth and success in 2019-20. Our first formal Immigrant Entrepreneur program was started in 2018 with support from the Government of Alberta and has exceeded almost all targets in its first year. We look forward to continuing this program while supporting the Government of Alberta's new immigration strategy.

We could not do the work we do without our funders, Western Economic Diversification, Government of Canada and Jobs, Economy and Innovation, Government of Alberta. They ensure that we have the support and insight we need to serve entrepreneurs, provide them with excellent resources and build a supportive team.

I would like to thank the hard-working staff at Business Link on behalf of the board. Your willingness to go above and beyond is what helps Business Link achieve its goals again and again.

I would also like to thank the dedication of our board. We are all volunteers with a wide range of interests and backgrounds as entrepreneurs, educators, financiers, and represent a group as diverse as the community the Business Link serves. We recently completed a recruiting campaign for the board and the breadth and caliber of the applicants that applied is a testament to Business Link's reputation and unique position in Alberta. Thank you all for your hard work and dedication to Business Link and its mission.





Finally, I want to comment on the strange times we live in today. We have all had to get used to Zoom meetings, social distancing, no handshaking, no networking events, face masks, and new ways of doing business. However, these inconveniences pale by comparison to the hard times experienced for many in our province and we know that there is a lot more work to come. At Business Link, we have been here to support you for nearly 25 years, and we will continue to help Alberta businesses grow, prosper and build into the future. We were able to remain operational during COVID 19, with our team working from home, and we continue to be here to help you in any way we can.



Here's to new challenges, new opportunities and the next year.

Chad Saunders
Board Chair, Business Link



OUTREACH, EVENTS, AND PROGRAMS METRICS

11,699

Total 1:1 interactions with Albertans



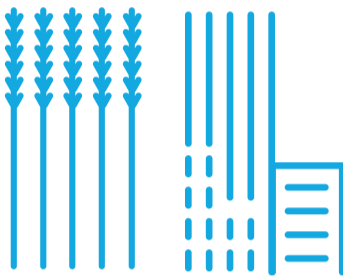
42

Number of organizations we partnered with



4,125

Interactions with rural Albertans



6,991

Interactions with urban Albertans

11,143

Clients reached through events



Satisfaction rate

99%

471

Total events we were a part of



787

Networking and special events attendees



185

1:1 Expert sessions with lawyers, accountants and other business professionals



834

Webinar attendees





INDIGENOUS SERVICES

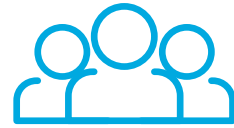
967

Total interactions



641

Indigenous clients served



25

First Nations
communities
visited

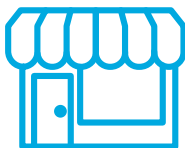


2

Metis
communities
visited

41

Businesses created,
maintained or expanded



648

Total training
participants



Satisfaction rate

99%



INDIGENOUS SERVICES PROCUREMENT PROGRAM

38

Businesses created,
maintained or expanded



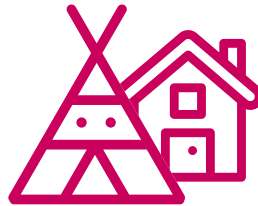
648

Total training
participants



15

First Nations
communities
visited



2

Metis
communities
cited

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 25, 2020

Creating prosperous self-employment opportunities for Indigenous Entrepreneurs

Lethbridge, Alta (Feb. 25, 2020) – On February 26, 2020 the first group of graduates will finish the Business Link self-employment program in Lethbridge in conjunction with SAAMIS Aboriginal Employment and Training. The program is titled “Indigenous Arts and Entrepreneurship Program” The graduates of the course have just completed an intensive 24-week program, facilitated by Business Link’s Piinaakoyim Tailfeathers.

The 24-week program; dives in depth, teaching the key building blocks of entrepreneurship. Participants who graduate the program will have a fully developed business plan that has been reviewed, a marketing plan, a finalized financial forecast and in-depth market research. The program is the first of its kind in Alberta and is funded by the Government of Canada.

“I believe through business and entrepreneurship we can improve the quality of life for Indigenous peoples. I choose to identify the barriers to success, only so we can find a way over, under, or around those barriers.” says facilitator of the self-employment program Piinaakoyim Tailfeathers. “I choose to breathe life into our clients and give them hope for good things to come. It has been a wonderful experience getting to know this group of individuals, and to be a part of their journey to entrepreneurship. Every business created is one step closer to a sustainable future for my people.”

In addition to entrepreneurship skills, participants are provided with traditional Indigenous arts and crafts training, with the goal being graduates finish with not only business expertise, but also an inventory of product. The first cohort of participants includes 10 graduates with 10 fully developed businesses ready to pursue self-employment and entrepreneurship.

Business Link and SAAMIS are thrilled to announce that this program will continue with a new group of participants starting in late March. For more information on the self-employment program visit businesslink.ca.

COVID-19

More ▾

Calgary

Indigenous program creates 12 Alberta businesses, including 'Indian taco' food truck

Arts and entrepreneurship initiative set to train a second cohort after successful pilot

CBC News · Posted: Mar 03, 2020 5:30 AM MT | Last Updated: March 3



The Indigenous Arts and Entrepreneurship Program, run by Business Link and Saamis Aboriginal Employment and Training Association, helped 12 participants launch their own businesses over the course of 24 weeks.

A new cohort will start the program in Lethbridge at the end of March.

"We realized there was already a lot of entrepreneurs here, they just didn't have the support, they didn't have the resources and they didn't have the network to make things happen," said Piinaakoyim Tailfeathers, the program facilitator.

He says a typical day in the program included arts and crafts instruction and business development.

"I think the main goal is for us, individually, to be developing ourselves so we can collectively improve our economic sustainability on reserve," said Tailfeathers.

Affordable regalia, Indian tacos

The program produced a range of businesses, including two food trucks, one of which will focus on selling "Indian tacos" and aims to travel throughout the region for events in the summer months.

Cindy Redcrow says her business, Redcrow Creations, will focus on custom beadwork and affordable powwow regalia.

"I've always liked playing store, like when I was a little child, and to me, this is my dream job," she said. "I've gotten to that point where I can make money and be happy and be self-sufficient with it."

Redcrow started selling her creations, first at a table, and then at a kiosk, as a side job almost 10 years ago. The course helped her develop a plan to transition to being self-employed full

"To me, I feel that if they're engaging in some activity like that in the summer, they're less likely to get into trouble or going down the wrong path."

First Nations economy

Redcrow, who's from the Blood Reserve, says it's important to create more Indigenous businesses.

"We definitely need an economy on our reserve. Our economy is basically nothing."

The program is free for participants and helps set them up to apply for grants and other funding.

Tailfeathers says two participants have secured funding, one totalling \$80,000, while the other secured \$200,000.

With files from Hala Ghonaim



IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEUR PROGRAM

1,154

Total interactions



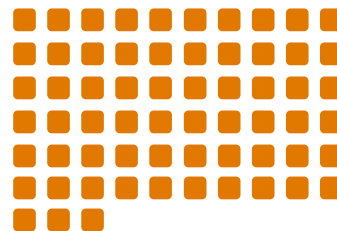
692

Immigrant clients served



Immigrant training sessions provided

63 Training sessions for clients



6 Training sessions for service providers



1,636

Total training participants



Client Success Story Blogs



Shane Breau of the Shoe Shine Shack started his retail shop in May 2018, where he offers a premium quick shoe shine service and shoe-care products in Edmonton. He came to Business Link for help with business planning, licensing and structure questions, and operational questions like marketing and accounting. He's also found help from ATB and Futurpreneur. A core piece of his business model is giving back to the community, by cleaning up gently used shoes and donating them to the less fortunate. Read the [full blog](#).

Geraldine Carriere is an author, speaker, movement coach, performer, and stylist. While working with Indigenous organizations and with Indigenous people, she noticed a gap within the communities: difficulty identifying and working through barriers that were holding Indigenous women back. She chose to be a source of solution for this gap. Read the [full blog](#).



Monica Kupczak Ainslie is the owner of House of Koopslie, a woman-led brand of eco-friendly, ethically manufactured, multi-wear bamboo clothing and accessories for women of all ages, shapes and sizes. The business has been very successful over its 10 years in existence, and Monica is working on selling it to concentrate on a new business. Business Link helped her to start her business, and now to take the right steps in selling. Read the [full blog](#).

Brandi Buss started her company, BeeLieve Lifestyle and Apparel in Ponoka, in January 2018 after being pickpocketed in Poland. The company offers a fashion line with a security function that allows you to store your credit card, cash, keys and ID in hidden pockets. She came to Business Link for help with secondary market research and attended workshops and webinars. Read the [full blog](#).



Andrew Rosychuk is the owner of Rosy Farms in Alcomdale, which is dedicated to growing haskap berries. Andrew bought his land in 2014 and planted his first orchard of over 10,000 bushes in 2016. The business offers u-pick and sells at farmers markets. Andrew is very involved in the agricultural community, as founder of the Haskap Alberta Association, a shareholder of North 49 Fruit Corporation, and involvement with the Young Agrarians. Read the [full blog](#).

CLIENT METRICS

AN IDEA

49% of inquiries we received were from businesses at the idea stage

49% of inquiries were from startups

ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

We answered 11,699 inquiries about everything from financing to marketing

11,699 inquiries

FEASIBILITY

Our market research team helped entrepreneurs decide if they should take the leap

849 market research requests completed

THE PLAN

Our Strategists offered support and advice on creating a business plan

1,034 business plan inquiries and reviews

BUSINESS TRAINING

We provided our clients with training to help build their business skills

4,764 training participants

REGULATIONS

We helped clients navigate regulations, permits, licenses, and more

2,372 inquiries related to regulations

EXPERT ADVICE

Our Expert Program connected entrepreneurs with local experts like lawyers and accounts

185 1:1 appointments with experts

CONNECTION

We hosted 17 networking and special events for small business owners

787 networking event attendees

FINANCING

We directed people to the right funders and financing for their business

1,644 financing inquiries