



Innovation Landscape Improving for Canadian Start-Ups (COVID-19 & IP Update)

August 7, 2020

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Spearheading a start-up is a challenging endeavor at the best of times, let alone in a pandemic. When COVID-19 hit this spring, entrepreneurs from coast to coast were faced with an entirely new set of challenges. As the economy slowed and funding became tight, many start-ups were forced to quickly re-strategize. Companies that could keep going forward virtually did so. Most companies closed their premises, or remained open on a limited capacity. The start-up community has recently been reopening more, as part of its comeback. Innovation has become an essential part of restarting the economy and finding a solution to COVID-19.

Innovation Hubs

While most accelerators and incubators across Eastern Canada remain closed, many have adopted alternative methods to deliver programs and resources. For instance, the RIC center in Mississauga has offered a [9-week summer program](#) to help entrepreneurs grow or pivot their business in the changed economy. Meanwhile, the TechAlliance in London, in partnership with Libro Credit Union and Pillar Nonprofit Network, launched [two challenges](#), one directed at responding to issues brought about by COVID-19 and another directed at building communities post pandemic. The recipients received seed funding and a suite of personalized business advisory, financial coaching, and community impact services. [Haltech](#) Regional Innovation Centre partnered with the Region of Halton's Small Business Centre, Economic Development teams, the Chambers of Commerce, and local Business Improvement Areas to support small businesses in adopting digital technologies. [ventureLAB](#) also recently announced an Entrepreneurship and Innovation Fund to develop innovative solutions in the York Region. Eligible organizations will receive \$100,000 in funding to continue community partnerships and further boost the York Region's economic health. The Innovation Cluster in Peterborough area has continued providing its services to start-ups [remotely](#), including via online workshops and through partnerships on its [COVID-19 Collaboration Platform](#).

Volta Labs in Halifax offered a virtual [recovery program](#) in June and July for start-ups affected by COVID-19. The six-week program provided leaders with tools to navigate the new normal, including sessions on financial planning, funding sources, sales, marketing in times of uncertainty, and human resources. Also on the East Coast, the tech start-up accelerator Propel has launched the [Start-up Summer Showdown Contest](#) for early stage start-ups in Atlantic Canada.

Canadian Governments and their Agencies

Local and federal governments have also stepped up to promote start-up innovation. For example, adMare BioInnovations has launched a new [acceleration program](#) for emerging life sciences companies in Quebec. The new program, funded by the Quebec Government and the City of Montreal, will provide adMare resources to pre-seed or seed-stage therapeutic, med-tech, or digital health companies undertaking their core activities in Quebec.

Likewise, the National Research Council of Canada (NRC), in collaboration with Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada's (ISED) Innovative Solutions Canada (ISC), has [provided funding](#) for innovative solutions to COVID-19. These include, for instance, the [Social Distancer™](#) developed by a new company founded by Quebec-based Promark Electronics. The company produces a wearable product designed to provide workers with a way to easily maintain a safe 2-metre distance between one another. PEI-based Top Dog Manufacturing (TDM) also [secured NRC funding](#) to expand its operations to manufacture a line of certified health and medical personal protective equipment. The company



has been able to expand production and is now seeking Health Canada approval of its gowns for use on the front lines against COVID-19.

Industry Associations / Non-Profit Sector

Start-up industry associations have been actively supporting their member organizations. The [Ontario Bioscience Innovation Organization](#) (OBIO) has been advising companies, offering virtual information sessions and maintaining a [current list](#) of available COVID-19 related resources. [Innovacorp](#) has been doing similar work in Nova Scotia. The [Newfoundland Association of Technical Industries](#) (NATI) provided outreach and resources, and surveyed its members on their needs. Springboard Atlantic compiled a [list of start-up company resources](#) and programs.

Mitacs, a non-profit national research organization, has also made several changes to support companies during the pandemic. The organization, whose focus is building industry-academic R&D collaborations through student training and professional skill development, has fast-tracked [funding approvals](#) and reduced partnering costs by 50%. They have allowed companies to pivot Mitacs-based research to work on solutions directed towards COVID-19. Through contribution of a Mitacs funded student, AVL Manufacturing's Hybrid Solution Division was able to transition from making green technology units to making mobile health units that provide a safe and controlled environment for hospital triage. The modules are deployable within minutes and include built-in HVAC and HEPA filtration systems. To further support innovative collaborations, Mitacs has also added a [business internships](#) stream and announced that students are eligible for [research internships](#) covering COVID-19.

Other Recent Announcements

The Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC) recently announced a [\\$160-million investment](#) into early stage companies' IP strategy and portfolio management to help improve commercialization. Providing further encouragement is the Minister of Innovation, Science, and Industry, Navdeep Bains who recently indicated the [possibility of extending](#) the National Research Council of Canada's Industrial Research Assistance Program (IRAP) COVID-19 Innovation Program (IAP). An extension to the program would be welcomed by the innovation community.

While COVID-19 is presenting undeniable challenges to Canadian start-up communities, they have been responding by doing what they do best – innovating. And they are not facing these challenges alone. Accelerators, industry associations and funders have stepped in to provide training, resources, and capital to sustain these innovators to continue work. While offices and labs are reopening slowly and cautiously, innovation is still taking off.

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