



Canadian Intellectual
Property Office

Office de la propriété
intellectuelle du Canada



What we heard

CIPO SME Roundtables 2025

Canada 

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Glossary

Term	Definition
<u>CanExport program</u>	The CanExport program offers financial assistance to Canadian small and medium-sized enterprises, helping them grow in global markets by covering a portion of the costs associated with exporting products or services in markets where applicants have limited or no sales.
<u>ElevateIP</u>	ElevateIP is a Government of Canada program that provides SMEs with tools and advice to understand, manage and leverage their intellectual property through supports offered by business accelerators and incubators.
Intellectual property	Intellectual property refers to legal rights such as patents, trademarks, copyright and industrial designs that protect creations of the mind and allow creators or owners to benefit from their work or investment.
IP portfolio	An IP portfolio refers to a collection of IP assets and related rights owned by an organization.
Patent Cooperation Treaty	The Patent Cooperation Treaty lets applicants pursue patent protection in many countries at the same time by filing a single international patent application.
Small and medium-sized enterprises	Small and medium-sized enterprises have between 1 and 499 paid employees.

List of acronyms

Acronym	Definition
AI	Artificial intelligence
CIPO	Canadian Intellectual Property Office
CRA	Canada Revenue Agency
EU	European Union
ISED	Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada
IP	Intellectual property
KPIs	Key performance indicators
NRC-IRAP	National Research Council of Canada Industrial Research Assistance Program
PCT	Patent Cooperation Treaty
PPH	Patent Prosecution Highway
SME	Small or medium-sized enterprise
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
SWOT	Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats
US	United States
USPTO	United States Patent and Trademark Office



Executive summary

In early 2025, the Canadian Intellectual Property Office (CIPO) held 10 roundtable discussions with 53 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Montréal, Vancouver, Calgary, Halifax, Toronto and Ottawa. Four sessions focused on entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups, including women, racialized and Indigenous business owners.

The roundtables provided insights into how SMEs view the value of intellectual property (IP), the challenges they face in securing and using it, and the support they need to succeed. Participants confirmed that IP is essential for financing, marketing, acquisitions, intelligence and litigation, but systemic barriers, particularly costs, timeliness, complexity and lack of IP knowledge, limit its benefits.

Most SMEs relied heavily on IP professionals but reported concerns with affordability, transparency and the generic nature of advice. While participants acknowledged that programs such as National Research Council of Canada Industrial Research Assistance Program (NRC-IRAP) IP Assist and Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) ElevateIP provided valuable entry points, many felt that the level of funding they personally accessed was insufficient to cover the full costs of IP strategy development and implementation.

Regional disparities were also noted alongside strengths in local ecosystems. Quebec entrepreneurs benefited from strong provincial networks; Ontario SMEs had access to many organizations but found the ecosystem fragmented; Atlantic businesses faced limited access to IP professionals but valued community-based support; Calgary participants appreciated the supports received, but pointed to burdensome funding processes; and Vancouver reported the highest costs in the country. Underrepresented entrepreneurs highlighted IP as crucial for credibility but described additional barriers such as complex program requirements and unclear communication about eligibility.

Participants identified **10 recommendations** to improve SME access to IP:

1. **Modernize CIPO's website and online navigation.**
2. **Expand IP education in universities and colleges.**
3. **Adjust fee structures with SME-friendly maintenance tiers.**
4. **Provide funding directly to businesses rather than service providers.**
5. **Reallocate funding toward IP protection and technical expertise.**
6. **Offer mentorship and one-on-one guidance.**
7. **Increase transparency around IP costs.**
8. **Develop tools for SMEs to self-manage routine tasks.**
9. **Ensure support throughout the business lifecycle.**
10. **Measure return on investment of public funds through appropriate key performance indicators (KPIs).**

These findings will inform CIPO's 2026–2031 Business Strategy and help strengthen Canada's IP ecosystem to better support innovators and entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Background

CIPO is a special operating agency within ISED, responsible for administering Canada's IP system. In a global economy increasingly driven by intangible assets, ensuring that the IP system is modern, accessible and responsive is critical to Canada's competitiveness and innovation.

The 2023–2028 Business Strategy sets out a vision for delivering quality IP rights, improving operational excellence and enhancing the client experience. Over the first years of this strategy, CIPO introduced upgrades to online platforms, streamlined filing processes and expanded digital-first educational activities. In 2024–2025 alone, CIPO engaged more than 600 entrepreneurs directly and reached over 7,000 through IP education webinars and presentations.

Despite these efforts, gaps remain. The 2022 Client Satisfaction Survey revealed overall net satisfaction of 37% across all CIPO clients, with IP agents reporting 34%, non-agent IP professionals 46%, and unrepresented clients, which primarily consists of businesses, 35%. To better understand these results and support the implementation of its new strategy, CIPO launched a series of roundtables in early 2025, targeting input from SMEs across Canada. Participants represented a wide spectrum of IP experience, from businesses with no registered IP to those managing active portfolios domestically and internationally.

Objectives

The roundtables were designed to deepen CIPO's understanding of how SMEs perceive and use IP. By engaging directly with entrepreneurs, the sessions sought to uncover the ways in which IP contributes to business growth, financing and competitiveness, while also identifying the barriers that limit SMEs in fully leveraging IP.

Another central objective was to capture the specific challenges SMEs face in preparing, securing and enforcing IP rights. Participants were invited to share their experiences with the cost, complexity and timelines associated with IP protection, as well as the pressures of balancing IP with other urgent business priorities.

The roundtables also aimed to assess SMEs' interactions with the broader IP ecosystem, including their experiences with CIPO services, federal and provincial programs, and the private sector. These discussions provided a candid view of where SMEs find value, where they encounter difficulties, and how they navigate the choices between public support and professional advice.

Finally, the sessions sought to gather forward-looking recommendations from entrepreneurs. By listening to those directly affected, CIPO aimed to capture practical, actionable suggestions to improve its services, and ensure that the IP system is inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of Canadian businesses.

Findings

Use of findings

CIPO's roundtables were exploratory in nature and intended to capture insights into SMEs' experiences with the IP system. Respondent comments have been grouped together from different sessions and from different areas of discussion, where appropriate, in order to keep like topics together.

Findings should be regarded as directional rather than conclusive. Roundtable discussions, by their very nature, may elicit anecdotes and observations from individual experience. They are valuable for capturing details of individual experience and the perceptions that have formed from those experiences.

Key themes

Across the country, entrepreneurs discussed their perspective on the IP ecosystem, how it helps them, current obstacles for SMEs and how IP is used practically. From this, 3 key themes emerged:

- A. The importance and value of IP**
- B. Preparing and securing IP protections**
- C. Seeking help with IP**



A. The importance and value of IP

Finding 1 – Using IP to leverage financing

Portfolios serve as financial assets that strengthen the overall business case for entrepreneurs. They not only improve access to capital by signalling credibility but also validate business models in the eyes of investors and partners, making IP an indispensable element of financing strategies.

Participants consistently emphasized that IP portfolios are critical for attracting investment. Investors and business partners frequently review IP holdings before making financial commitments, using them as indicators of credibility and future value.

For many entrepreneurs, particularly those from underrepresented groups, owning IP was described as a way to be taken seriously in competitive markets and to demonstrate the legitimacy of their business to potential stakeholders. Without IP, some felt that their ventures were dismissed or overlooked by funders, regardless of the strength of their products or services.



What we heard:

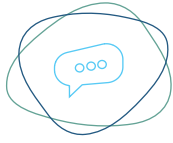
- (Toronto/Halifax) Participants shared that having at least a filed patent or “patent pending” status helped overcome assumptions that they lacked technical capacity.
- (Prairies) A participant reported being ignored by investors until filing a US provisional patent.
- (Montréal) Entrepreneurs noted that IP was required to secure strategic partnerships with research computing and data collaborators.

Finding 2 – Using IP as a marketing asset

IP provides a marketing advantage by enhancing legitimacy and positioning businesses as credible players. It strengthens early-stage branding, fosters client trust, and helps companies stand out in competitive markets where reputation is essential.

Many entrepreneurs highlighted the role of IP in building brand legitimacy and strengthening customer trust. In business-to-business markets, IP rights were viewed as a baseline expectation, with certain industries, such as geothermal energy, considering them almost mandatory.

Some early-stage companies were less convinced about the immediate value of trademarks but still acknowledged their importance in consumer markets where reputation and visibility matter. Participants agreed that owning IP gave them a stronger footing when presenting themselves to clients, partners or potential collaborators.



What we heard:

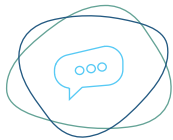
- (Vancouver) Participants noted that patents are expected in geothermal and industrial innovation markets.
- (Toronto) Participants said they did not initially value trademarks, but realized quickly that trademarks protect brand identity during growth.
- (Atlantic Canada) Businesses emphasized that brand confusion in US and EU markets can erode early reputation if trademarks are not secured.
- (Montréal) Several SMEs said clients equated IP with professionalism, making it easier to win contracts.

Finding 3 – Using IP for acquisition and market exits

While IP portfolios are undeniably critical to acquisition strategies, increasing valuation and attractiveness to buyers, the perception that Canada’s IP ecosystem is oriented toward exits undermines long-term competitiveness. Supporting SMEs in using IP to scale, remain in Canada and compete globally is just as important as ensuring their assets are attractive in the context of acquisitions.

Participants reported that acquisition prospects increase significantly when a company has a strong IP portfolio, alongside talent and market share. For many SMEs, IP was seen less as a tool for long-term growth and more as proof of investment to position themselves for sale. Several entrepreneurs expressed concern that Canada’s innovation ecosystem appears to focus on, or even expect, SMEs to eventually exit the market rather than scale and remain rooted in Canada.

While acquisitions can be a positive outcome, the emphasis on exit strategies often came at the expense of providing the support SMEs need to stay and thrive domestically. This was particularly troubling for firms that wanted to grow in Canada but felt pushed toward acquisition as the only viable option to realize value from their IP.



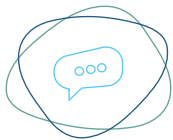
What we heard:

- (Calgary) Participants noted that investors evaluate 3 core drivers for acquisition: technical talent, traction and IP assets.
- (Toronto) Several participants described Canada’s innovation environment as biased toward early exits, with IP serving as the primary valuation anchor.
- (Montréal) Participants said IP was often treated as the asset rather than one of many during acquisitions.

Finding 4 – Using IP to gather intelligence

IP functions not only as a protective mechanism but also as a strategic resource for intelligence gathering. When used effectively, it provides SMEs with knowledge that can inform product development, competitive positioning and market exploration.

SMEs noted that patent disclosures serve as valuable sources of competitive intelligence. By reviewing published patents, entrepreneurs could monitor developments in their sector, assess competitor strategies and refine their own products. This practice provided insights into both technological opportunities and potential barriers to entry, allowing businesses to make better-informed decisions. Several participants remarked that they had discovered opportunities for collaboration or differentiation simply by analyzing IP information already in the public domain.



What we heard:

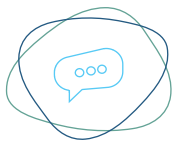
- (Toronto) Patent searches revealed competing products in development, letting the team adjust design direction early.
- (Calgary) Participants used competitor filings to identify collaboration or licensing opportunities.
- (Vancouver) SMEs said they used patents to anticipate emerging market trends.
- (Montréal) Reviewing international filings helped prevent unintentional infringement during prototype development.

Finding 5 – Using IP as a litigation tool

Patents provide SMEs with freedom to operate and visible protection, but their value as litigation tools is undermined by the high costs of enforcement. Without targeted support, SMEs are left vulnerable in disputes with larger firms, reinforcing a perception that patents primarily benefit those with greater resources. Addressing this gap with enforcement assistance would help smaller firms realize the full protective value of their IP assets.

Many SMEs stressed that patents play an important role in ensuring freedom to operate in specific markets and in protecting inventions when challenged by competitors. For some, the value of IP only became fully apparent when facing significant rivals or when commercialization required visible protection. However, participants were also candid about the limitations of patents as defensive tools. Enforcing rights was described as prohibitively costly and time-consuming, often demanding more resources than SMEs could realistically allocate.

Several entrepreneurs said they had to choose between focusing on product development and brand-building or investing heavily in enforcement, with most opting for the former. Many expressed frustration that larger firms almost always had the upper hand in disputes, due to their deeper financial resources and stronger legal capacity. A number of SMEs called for specific programs or support that would help smaller businesses enforce their IP rights, thereby leveling the playing field against larger competitors.



What we heard:

- (Halifax) SMEs described patents as defensive shields rather than active litigation tools.
- (Calgary) Participants said larger firms almost always win patent disputes due to resource imbalance.
- (Vancouver) SMEs expressed a desire for government-supported enforcement mechanisms, not only funding for filing.



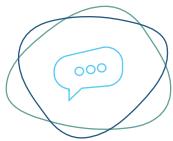
B. Preparing and securing IP protection

Finding 1 – Costs as the main obstacle

High costs remain the most significant barrier to SMEs' ability to protect IP. Limited access to venture capital, combined with the complexity of anticipating long-term expenses, amplifies this challenge and leaves many firms unprotected at crucial stages of their growth.

Across all regions, SMEs consistently identified costs as the single greatest barrier to obtaining and maintaining IP protection. Filing fees, maintenance charges, translation costs and professional service fees were often described as prohibitively high, with some entrepreneurs comparing the expense of securing patents to the annual salary of a skilled employee.

Participants admitted they underestimated the financial requirements at the outset, leading to difficult trade-offs later. Few were aware of expedited examination options such as the Patent Prosecution Highway (PPH), despite Canada's participation in global networks with 27 IP offices and bilateral partnerships with 5 additional offices. Costs were considered highest in Vancouver, where the local market was already expensive for startups.



What we heard:

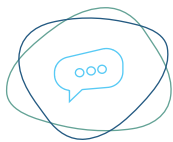
- (Vancouver) SMEs emphasized that IP legal fees were among the highest in the country.
- (Calgary) Participants shared that the combined cost of drafting, filing and prosecuting a single patent can exceed \$30,000 to \$60,000, far beyond early-stage budgets.
- (Halifax) Participants noted that funding did not match actual IP costs, forcing them to choose between protecting innovations or paying operational expenses.
- (Montréal) SMEs said they often did not realize the full cost structure, including ongoing maintenance, until after filing.
- (Prairies) Participants noted that capital scarcity in their region made patenting timelines especially risky because revenues lag far behind development.

Finding 2 – IP is one of many competing priorities

Timelines for securing IP protection must better reflect the pace of SME innovation and commercialization. Unless faster and more flexible options are introduced, SMEs will continue to deprioritize IP, leaving innovations vulnerable and weakening Canada’s ability to translate creativity into long-term competitive advantage.

SMEs repeatedly described the patenting process as lengthy, complex and poorly suited to their fast-paced business environments. Many explained that innovation cycles, particularly in technology-driven sectors, are shorter than the time it takes to secure IP rights. As a result, some entrepreneurs abandoned patent applications when timelines exceeded their product life cycles.

Others explained that while they recognized the long-term value of IP, they were forced to prioritize more immediate needs, such as research and development, hiring skilled staff, marketing, or entering new markets. Several participants described IP as a “nice-to-have” rather than an urgent necessity when compared with the day-to-day demands of keeping their businesses afloat.



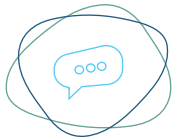
What we heard:

- (Vancouver) Innovations were moving faster than patent timelines, making patents feel obsolete before being granted.
- (Toronto) Participants described needing to focus on product validation first, with IP reportedly seen as important, but not urgent.
- (Calgary) Several SMEs abandoned patent applications after realizing the prosecution timeline outlasted product cycles.
- (Montréal) Participants said that speed to market outweighs patent timing in early commercialization.
- Across regions, SMEs agreed that patenting creates long-term benefit, but short-term strain, especially for small teams.

Finding 3 – Filing in the United States first

Even without complete understanding of the US provisional system, SMEs recognized its practical advantages in balancing innovation cycles and funding timelines. Canada’s lack of a provisional filing option places domestic innovators at a disadvantage, limiting their ability to manage early-stage risks while preparing for commercialization.

Some SMEs reported filing provisional patents in the United States (US) before pursuing Patent Cooperation Treaty (PCT) applications. Although not all entrepreneurs fully understood the legal mechanics of the provisional system, they emphasized the value of gaining an additional 12 months to secure funding, refine their products and attract investors. Many described the “patent pending” designation as especially helpful in signalling credibility during early discussions with partners and funders. Several expressed strong interest in having a comparable option available in Canada.



What we heard:

- (Toronto) Startups reported that investors recognized and valued US provisional patents more immediately in due diligence.
- (Vancouver) SMEs noted that most competitors and potential acquirers were US-based, making US filings strategically logical.
- (Calgary) Participants said they used the US provisional system to signal credibility during early partnership negotiations.
- (Atlantic Canada) Several participants mentioned they would have preferred to file a Canadian provisional if one existed.
- (Montréal) Companies expanding globally noted that US filings were often perceived as the “default starting point” for emerging tech firms.

C. Seeking help with IP

Participants had different levels of IP knowledge, from very little to substantial experience gained over time. All participants agreed that they required assistance to get started and throughout their IP journey. Many SMEs expressed that “you don’t know what you don’t know,” emphasizing that IP literacy is generally low among early-stage businesses and the responsibility to self-educate often falls on the entrepreneur.

Where SMEs turned for support varied widely. Some learned from university programs or peer networks, others through funding programs and business support organizations, and many through IP professionals. Very few participants reported starting their IP journey directly with CIPO.

The majority of SMEs highlighted the need to introduce IP literacy earlier, especially in academic environments, to reduce confusion and dependence on external advisors, and enable more strategic decision-making.

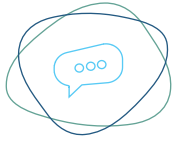
Finding 1 – Support from CIPO: IP education and online services

In terms of how clients interact with and perceive CIPO, its limited visibility undermines SMEs’ ability to develop their own IP knowledge. By expanding direct client-facing services and positioning itself as a trusted partner, similar to the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) or Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), CIPO can empower entrepreneurs, reduce over-reliance on intermediaries, and strengthen confidence in the system.

Secondly, raising awareness of CIPO’s education services would significantly expand IP literacy among SMEs. By positioning itself as a trusted, impartial leader in education, CIPO could help entrepreneurs make better-informed decisions early in their business journeys.

Modernizing CIPO’s digital presence is critical for improving accessibility and client satisfaction. A more intuitive and efficient website would enable entrepreneurs to manage basic IP tasks with greater confidence and independence.

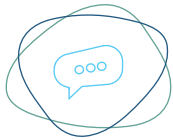
Many SMEs said their interactions with the IP system were almost entirely mediated through lawyers or agents, leaving CIPO itself nearly invisible. Unlike the USPTO or the CRA, which provide clear client-facing services, CIPO was seen as distant. Entrepreneurs wanted more direct opportunities to interact with the office, gain knowledge, and access guidance without always relying on intermediaries. They felt greater visibility would reduce dependence on costly agents and build confidence in navigating the system themselves.



What we heard:

- (Atlantic Canada) Participants expressed frustration that critical procedural information was found only after making mistakes.
- (Toronto) Participants wanted more proactive reminders and step-by-step guidance to avoid missing key deadlines.
- (Calgary) SMEs said that without direct guidance, they relied heavily on IP agents, increasing costs.
- (Vancouver) Participants felt that CIPO does not feel visible in the innovation ecosystem compared to the USPTO.
- (Montréal) Some SMEs requested more direct channels of communication with CIPO for clarification before filing.

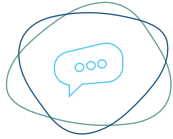
Many SMEs said they were unaware of CIPO's IP education services. Those who had attended bootcamps or participated in one-on-one sessions with IP advisors found them highly valuable, particularly because of their practical, step-by-step guidance. Participants also noted that Canada's IP education landscape felt fragmented across jurisdictions and organizations, creating confusion about where to find impartial and reliable support. Several entrepreneurs said they would welcome a stronger leadership role from CIPO in coordinating and promoting IP education nationally.



What we heard:

- (Halifax) Entrepreneurs said that bootcamps translated IP into plain language, helping them understand strategy.
- (Toronto) Participants who had one-on-one sessions with CIPO advisors said it helped them feel more confident talking to IP professionals.
- (Prairies) Participants reported difficulty finding out that these services even existed, despite active searching.
- (Montréal) SMEs recommended that CIPO lead a national curriculum to unify scattered IP education across jurisdictions.
- (Vancouver) Several participants said IP education was the most valuable support, but it came too late in their journey.

CIPO's website was consistently described as outdated, difficult to navigate and inferior to international counterparts. Participants said the website lacked intuitive design, clear search functions and user-friendly tools. For many entrepreneurs, the experience of using the site increased their reliance on IP professionals or intermediaries, rather than empowering them to complete tasks independently.



What we heard:

- (All regions) SMEs described the website as hard to navigate, unclear and not intuitive.
- (Halifax) Participants shared that they abandoned attempts to self-file due to user experience challenges.
- (Toronto) Participants suggested improving search functions and adding guided workflows for common tasks.
- (Vancouver) SMEs noted that other jurisdictions (e.g., USPTO) provide more user-friendly interfaces.
- (Montréal) Participants noted that website difficulty reinforces reliance on IP lawyers, increasing costs.

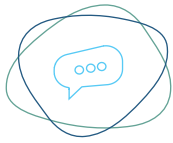
Finding 2 – Support from IP programs

Some participants felt that current program designs do not consistently support SMEs through the full IP lifecycle.

Clearer and more streamlined program pathways were identified as important to help SMEs move effectively from education to strategy and implementation. Without this, strategies risk becoming “paper exercises” that fail to translate into business impact.

Flexible funding structures are required to reflect the realities of early-stage businesses. Programs must allow SMEs to balance short-term commercialization priorities with the longer-term development of IP assets.

SMEs frequently accessed NRC-IRAP's IP Assist and ISED's ElevateIP, both structured around 3 levels of support: Level 1 (education), Level 2 (strategy development) and Level 3 (implementation). Most entrepreneurs said they only reached Level 1, with very few advancing to Level 3, which they considered the most beneficial. Several participants indicated that the funding they personally accessed was insufficient to cover the full costs of IP protection, leaving critical gaps as they moved toward implementation. Some also used the Trade Commissioner Service's CanExport program and university-based IP legal clinics, but these were described as small-scale support that provided useful entry points without bridging the gap to more resource-intensive phases.

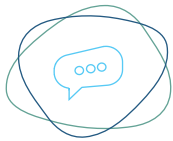


What we heard:

- (Toronto) Some SMEs described levels 2 and 3 application processes as time-consuming and overly complex.
- (Calgary) Some businesses ran out of operational runway waiting for funding approval.
- (Atlantic Canada) Some SMEs noted a lack of communication when funding was denied.
- (Montréal) Participants reported difficulty identifying which program leads to which stage.
- (Vancouver) Participants emphasized that education-only support does not change outcomes unless funding follows.

Entrepreneurs explained that program funds were often used to hire IP professionals. Experiences with resulting IP strategies varied. While some participants found the process complex and frustrating, particularly when attempting to access higher levels of support, others reported they found quality and usefulness in strategies when the delivery partner and advisor involved was also of quality.

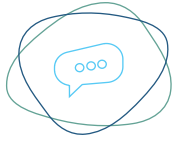
Several SMEs felt that strategies were highly valuable in shaping decision-making, while others found them difficult to tailor to their specific business context without additional support or funding for implementation.



What we heard:

- (Toronto) Some SMEs said IP strategies often felt generic, lacking business-specific tailoring.
- (Montréal) Participants noted that quality and usefulness of strategy depended heavily on the consultant and delivery partner.
- (Calgary) Some participants did not fully understand the strategy they received, while others said it helped clarify priorities even if implementation funding was limited.
- (Halifax) Participants emphasized that strategies were most valuable when paired with funding or follow-up support.
- (Vancouver) Participants expressed strong appreciation for strategy support but highlighted the need for ongoing mentorship rather than one-time documents.

Startups with fewer than 5 employees often struggled to balance immediate commercialization needs with the demands of building IP strategies. Entrepreneurs said that, in the earliest stages, resources were urgently required for hiring technical expertise, refining prototypes or accessing markets. Program requirements that prioritized IP strategies ahead of these needs often caused delays or even rejections.



What we heard:

- (Prairies) SMEs said they needed to hire engineers, not lawyers at early stages.
- (Calgary) Startups felt funding programs did not reflect startup pace, creating delays.
- (Toronto) Participants shared that IP strategy prerequisites blocked access to other funding.
- (Montréal) SMEs noted difficulty converting prototypes to products without technical support funding.
- (Vancouver) Participants viewed IP as strategically important, but not always the first urgent investment.

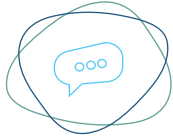
Finding 3 – Support from IP professionals

Clearer guidance and transparency in professional services, along with better matching of expertise to business needs, would help SMEs secure advice that is both relevant and cost-effective.

Greater transparency in pricing and access to self-service tools for routine tasks could ease financial pressures, allowing SMEs to reserve professional support for complex matters. Strategies must be tailored to business context and backed by funding for implementation if they are to provide meaningful value to SMEs.

Gaps in IP literacy make SMEs dependent on professional advice, sometimes to their detriment. Improving transparency, accountability and baseline IP knowledge would strengthen trust in both service providers and public programs, ensuring SMEs receive real value for their investments.

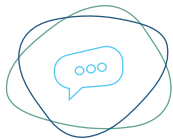
SMEs viewed IP professionals as essential, particularly for patent filings, given the complexity of the process. However, they reported difficulty choosing the right professional and uncertainty about service offerings. Some felt pressured into unnecessary or overly broad filings that consumed limited budgets.



What we heard:

- (Atlantic Canada) SME founders changed IP professionals multiple times before finding a fit.
- (Toronto) SMEs said lawyers often presented multiple service options, but did not indicate which were necessary.
- (Calgary) Some IP firms drafted overly broad filings (“kitchen sink applications”), increasing cost.
- (Montréal) Participants emphasized the value of IP professionals who explain decisions clearly.
- (Vancouver) Many participants viewed IP lawyers as essential but expensive partners.

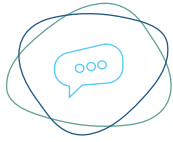
Professional services were described as prohibitively expensive, often exceeding the value of government support. SMEs noted that IP fees were among the highest legal costs they faced, leading some to self-file trademarks or delay filings to reduce expenses.



What we heard:

- (All regions) SMEs described IP services as one of the highest legal costs they encounter.
- (Toronto) Costs often exceeded what government programs covered, forcing SMEs to subsidize the rest.
- (Halifax) Some opted to self-file trademarks to save money.
- (Vancouver/Montréal) SMEs sacrificed territorial coverage (e.g., delaying EU/Asia filings) due to cost.
- (Calgary) Participants said lack of pricing transparency made budgeting difficult.

Strategies prepared with professional support often felt generic and disconnected from SMEs’ realities. Without funding for implementation, many described them as “paper exercises” that did not translate into actionable plans.



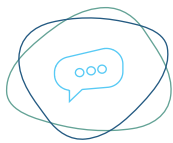
What we heard:

- (Toronto) Many strategies lacked tailoring to specific business models.
- (Halifax) SMEs said strategies required expert interpretation to be actionable.
- (Prairies) Participants expressed that IP strategy requirements sometimes felt like paper exercises.
- (Vancouver) SMEs found that implementation funding was rarely available, leading to stalled execution.
- (Montréal) Participants emphasized the need for ongoing mentorship, not one-time consulting.

Finding 4 – Return on investments for using IP programs

While many SMEs described positive outcomes from IP programs and professional advice, some participants questioned whether gaps in IP literacy limited their ability to fully assess the value of services received. Improving transparency, accountability and baseline IP knowledge would strengthen trust in both service providers and public programs, ensuring SMEs receive real value for their investments.

Some SMEs questioned whether existing IP programs and professional services provided real value for the money invested. Entrepreneurs with limited IP literacy often felt compelled to follow the advice of service providers without fully understanding the rationale, leaving them vulnerable to what they perceived as over-servicing or unnecessary filings. A few even suggested that some professionals were “abusing the system” by recommending strategies that prioritized billable work over business outcomes. This sense of mistrust was reinforced by the absence of transparent benchmarks to measure whether services or programs produced meaningful results.



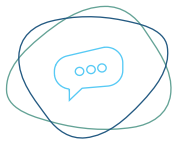
What we heard:

- (Calgary) SMEs expressed concern that IP strategy documents felt templated, lacking business-specific context.
- (Vancouver) Some participants shared that billing expectations were unclear, leading to unexpected invoices during prosecution.
- (Montréal) Businesses reported feeling pressure to commit to larger IP portfolios earlier than made sense for their maturity.
- (Prairies) Several entrepreneurs perceived that program-funded consulting sometimes led to maximum billable work, rather than what was strategically required.

Finding 5 – Protecting trademarks

While the accessibility of the trademark filing process is a strength, the lack of complexity may also lead SMEs to overlook the strategic importance of trademarks in building brand value. Without professional guidance or a broader branding strategy, businesses risk pitfalls such as selecting marks that are difficult to defend, failing to plan for future international markets or encountering barriers when exporting products abroad. Supporting SMEs in developing more strategic approaches to trademarks could prevent these challenges and help them leverage trademarks as a long-term business asset.

SMEs generally felt that filing for trademarks was straightforward and did not necessarily require the assistance of IP professionals. Many entrepreneurs chose to complete the process themselves, citing the simplicity of the Canadian online system and the relatively lower costs compared to patents. For most, trademarks were seen as accessible entry points into IP protection that could be managed without specialized expertise.



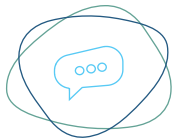
What we heard:

- (Halifax) SMEs described trademark filing as the entry point into IP: simple, predictable and affordable.
- (Montréal) Several participants self-filed trademarks and were successful without professional help.
- (Toronto) Entrepreneurs said trademarks were essential to protect brand identity early, especially when preparing to sell online.
- (Calgary) Some participants later regretted choosing names without checking international availability, resulting in expensive rebranding.
- (Vancouver) SMEs noted that lack of strategic thinking around trademarks caused issues when entering the US or EU markets.

Finding 6 – Trusting expertise

The inconsistency in professional services creates a trust gap that forces SMEs to spend additional time and resources finding the right fit. Building IP literacy among entrepreneurs, improving transparency about professional roles and encouraging best practices within the profession would help address this gap.

Entrepreneurs described inconsistent experiences with IP professionals. Many said they had to “shop around” before finding one they trusted, and some reported that the advice they received felt generic or overly focused on fees rather than business outcomes. Others, however, praised professionals who were transparent, practical and invested in their clients’ success. This variability left SMEs uncertain about how to evaluate quality and value when selecting advisors.



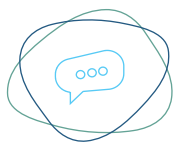
What we heard:

- (Vancouver) SMEs noted significant variation in quality among professionals, even at similar price points.
- (Halifax) Entrepreneurs valued professionals who explained trade-offs in plain language.
- (Calgary) Some participants shared that prior advisors focused on billable tasks rather than strategic fit.
- (Montréal) Participants described finding a trusted professional as a turning point in their growth.
- (Prairies) SMEs wanted a transparent way to evaluate advisors before committing to long-term engagements.

Finding 7 – SMEs leveraging AI for IP strategies and support

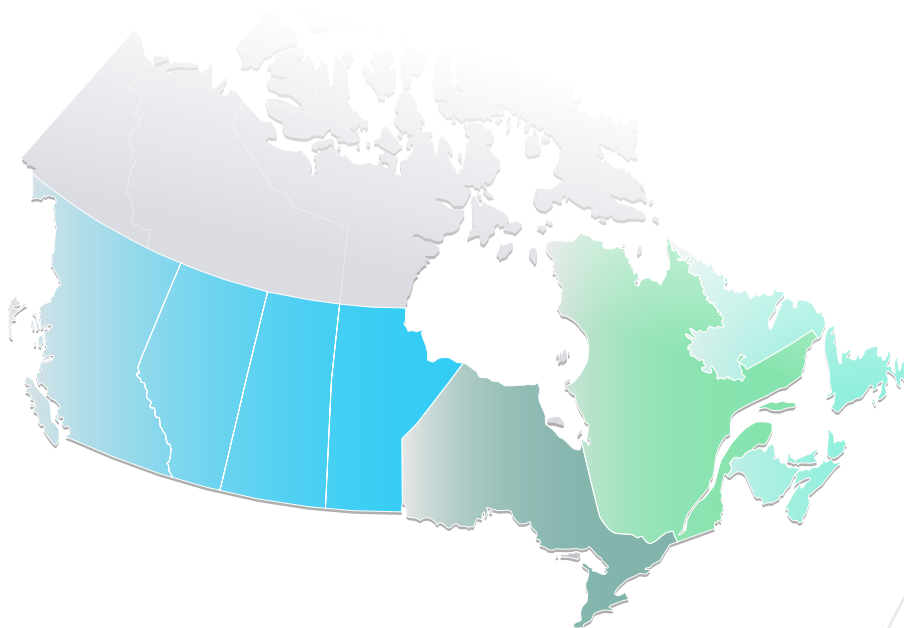
Artificial intelligence (AI) offers SMEs new opportunities to lower costs and access early-stage IP support, but it also poses risks if relied upon without professional oversight. The growing use of AI highlights the importance of CIPO providing guidance on safe and effective ways for SMEs to integrate these tools into their IP journey.

Some SMEs reported experimenting with AI tools to support parts of their IP journey, including drafting strategies, preparing preliminary patent applications and conducting prior art searches. They appreciated the cost savings and speed, but expressed concerns about accuracy, confidentiality and whether documents generated with AI would withstand legal scrutiny. Several acknowledged that while AI gave them a starting point, professional review was still necessary to ensure compliance and quality.



What we heard:

- (Vancouver) SMEs used AI to identify prior art patterns quickly, saving early research hours.
- (Calgary) Participants expressed concerns about confidentiality risks when using public AI tools with sensitive IP details.
- (Halifax) Participants asked whether AI-generated filings would be considered reliable in legal proceedings.
- (Across regions) SMEs recognized AI as a cost-saving starting point, but not a substitute for professional review.



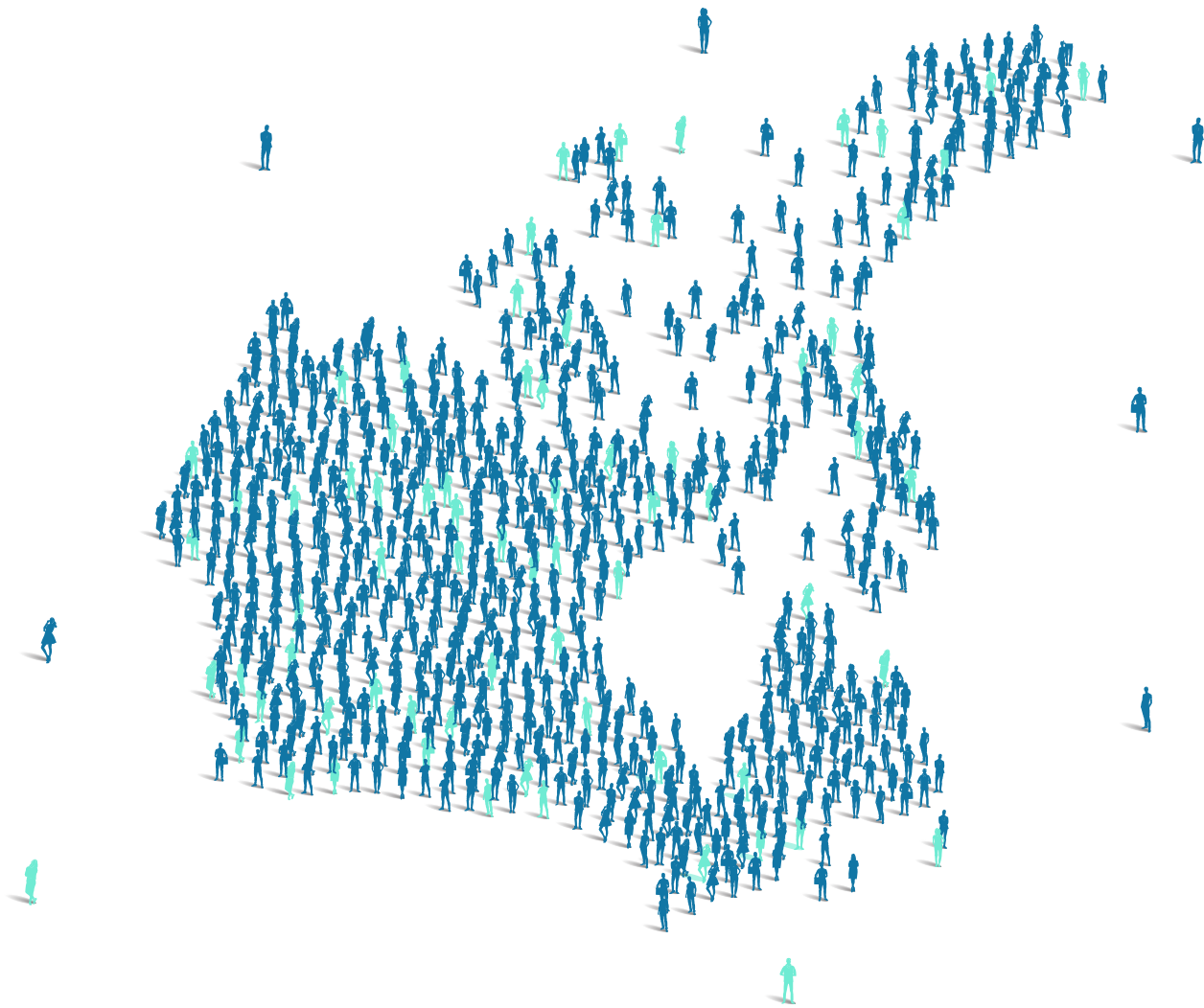


Regional distinctions and underrepresented groups

A closer look at the regions

While the roundtables revealed several common themes across Canada, they also highlighted regional variations and distinct challenges faced by underrepresented entrepreneurs. These perspectives provide a fuller picture of how SMEs experience the IP system and where tailored responses are needed.

- **Quebec:** Participants described a strong provincial ecosystem with dedicated funding and robust networks of incubators and accelerators. Entrepreneurs in Quebec reported greater access to resources and mentorship compared to other regions.
- **Ontario:** SMEs benefited from a wide variety of support, including IP Ontario, innovation hubs, incubators, accelerators and active angel investor networks. However, they raised concerns about the distribution of IP funding and the high complexity of application processes. While support was abundant, the administrative burden and fragmented ecosystem made navigation difficult and discouraged smaller firms from applying.
- **Atlantic Canada:** Participants reported a shortage of local IP professionals, which forced businesses to rely on experts outside the region. This added costs and limited mentorship opportunities. SMEs, however, appreciated the personalized and community-based support provided by regional business associations, which offered trusted first points of contact even if they could not replace specialized IP expertise.
- **Western Canada (Vancouver in particular):** Costs of IP services were described as prohibitively high, creating barriers for startups in an already expensive market. Innovation cycles moved quickly, but high IP costs often led businesses to delay or abandon filings. SMEs also raised concerns about inequitable distribution of IP funding programs and the overly complex application processes that discouraged participation.



Underrepresented groups

Four of the 10 roundtables focused specifically on women, racialized and Indigenous entrepreneurs. For these participants, IP was often described as even more critical because it validated their credibility in the marketplace and signaled professionalism to potential investors and clients. However, these entrepreneurs also faced additional barriers.

Some reported that funding programs imposed added conditions or requirements that were more difficult to meet, while others described poor communication around rejections that left them uncertain about eligibility or next steps. Underrepresented entrepreneurs emphasized the value of being matched with IP professionals from similar backgrounds, which fostered trust and improved communication.

Overall, participants from underrepresented groups underlined the importance of ensuring that IP support is inclusive, accessible and culturally sensitive. They recommended that CIPO and its partners work to reduce barriers and create tailored programs that recognize the diverse realities of Canadian entrepreneurs.

SWOT analysis based on insights

The insights gathered from the roundtables reflect both the opportunities and the challenges facing Canadian SMEs in their use of IP. To distill these perspectives into a strategic view, the results have been summarized in a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis. This analysis captures the strengths of the current IP ecosystem, the weaknesses that limit its effectiveness, the opportunities for improvement identified by participants and the external threats that could hinder Canada's innovation ambitions if left unaddressed.

Strengths



- SMEs recognize IP as vital for financing, marketing, acquisitions and competitiveness.
- CIPO's bootcamps and advisors are highly valued by those who access them.
- Canada's IP system offers multiple channels of support.
- Regional and community-based support strengthens the ecosystem.

Weaknesses



- High costs of securing and maintaining IP rights.
- Limited awareness of CIPO's services and fragmented education landscape.
- Outdated CIPO website and digital tools.
- Timelines for IP protection misaligned with SME innovation cycles.
- Federal programs provide inconsistent national reach and foundational support.

Opportunities



- Modernize CIPO's digital presence.
- Expand IP education in universities and colleges.
- Introduce provisional patent filings in Canada.
- Provide direct, flexible funding to SMEs.
- Develop mentorship programs and self-service tools.

Threats



- SMEs deprioritize IP in favour of immediate needs.
- US filings remain more attractive, drawing Canadian innovation south.
- Without enforcement support, SMEs may abandon defending their rights.
- Regional and equity disparities risk leaving entrepreneurs underserved.

Participant recommendations

Participants across the roundtables offered 10 clear recommendations, which were grouped into actions for CIPO directly and for the broader Canadian IP ecosystem. These recommendations reflected both immediate pain points, such as outdated digital tools and fee structures, and longer-term aspirations, such as embedding IP literacy into education and ensuring accountability in public funding.

Recommendations for CIPO

1. Improve CIPO's website and online navigation

Participants emphasized the need for a modern, client-friendly website that matches the standards of international counterparts. Entrepreneurs described the current site as outdated and difficult to navigate, making it harder to find clear and timely information. They asked for intuitive tools, better search functions, proactive reminders about deadlines and streamlined processes for filings and renewals. SMEs also highlighted that the growing use of AI means CIPO should provide guidance on how to safely and effectively integrate AI tools into the IP journey.

2. Expand IP education in universities and colleges

Participants stressed that IP education should begin much earlier in the entrepreneurial journey. Many wished they had learned about IP basics during their studies rather than discovering its importance later, often through costly mistakes. Embedding IP education in curricula would normalize it as a core element of business literacy, equipping future entrepreneurs with the knowledge to make informed decisions before they launch ventures.

3. Adjust fee structures to include SME-friendly maintenance tiers

SMEs called for more affordable, predictable and transparent fee structures. Many noted that current costs for filing, maintaining and defending IP rights were comparable to hiring a full-time employee, a major burden for small firms. Participants suggested tiered or scaled maintenance fees that would reduce pressure on smaller businesses while still supporting the sustainability of the system.

Recommendations for the Canadian IP ecosystem

1. Provide funding directly to businesses

Entrepreneurs voiced frustration with funding that flowed through intermediaries, such as service providers or innovation hubs, rather than directly to SMEs. They argued that direct funding would give them more flexibility to decide whether to prioritize filings, technical expertise or commercialization, depending on their stage of growth.

2. Reallocate funding toward IP protection and technical expertise

Many participants noted that current programs invest heavily in IP education and strategy development but not enough in actual protection or commercialization support. SMEs felt that this left them vulnerable at precisely the moment when protection was most critical. Redirecting resources toward filings, enforcement and access to technical expertise would ensure more meaningful outcomes.

3. Offer mentorship and guidance from IP professionals

Beyond transactional services, SMEs asked for mentorship opportunities that would give them tailored, practical advice aligned to their business model, sector and stage of growth. They felt that IP strategies were often too generic, providing limited practical guidance for implementation. Personalized mentorship would help bridge this gap while building trust and capacity within the ecosystem.

4. Increase transparency around costs

SMEs repeatedly emphasized that hidden or unexpected costs were among their biggest frustrations. They recommended that both CIPO and IP professionals provide upfront clarity on filing fees, maintenance obligations and service charges. Transparency would allow entrepreneurs to budget more accurately, make informed trade-offs and avoid unpleasant surprises that lead to abandoned filings.

5. Develop self-management tools for routine tasks

Entrepreneurs expressed interest in tools that would allow them to manage simple, recurring IP tasks themselves, such as paying maintenance fees, tracking renewal deadlines or generating standard forms. By reducing reliance on professionals for these routine tasks, SMEs could lower costs and gain greater confidence in handling basic IP administration.

6. Ensure support is available throughout a company's lifecycle

Participants cautioned that SMEs' needs evolve significantly over time. Early-stage businesses may prioritize funding and technical expertise, while growth-stage firms face challenges with enforcement, export markets and scaling. Entrepreneurs recommended that support be structured to follow them throughout their lifecycle rather than concentrated only at entry points.

7. Measure the return on investment of public funds through clear key performance indicators (KPIs)

SMEs asked for greater accountability in how public investments in IP support are evaluated. They suggested measuring outcomes such as the number of SMEs advancing from education to strategy to implementation, the success of underrepresented entrepreneurs or the impact of funding on commercialization. Transparent KPIs would reassure entrepreneurs that programs are delivering real value and would help improve trust in the system.

Conclusion and next steps

The 2025 roundtables provided CIPO with clear and detailed insights into how Canadian SMEs experience the IP system. Entrepreneurs consistently emphasized the value of IP, yet also highlighted systemic barriers such as high costs, complex and lengthy processes, limited awareness and uneven access to services across regions and groups.

Overall, SMEs are not asking for IP to be deprioritized. They want a system that reflects their pace, resources and realities. They called on CIPO to modernize its digital presence, expand education and introduce SME-friendly fee structures, while urging the broader Canadian IP ecosystem to provide more direct, transparent and lifecycle-sensitive support.

CIPO will use these findings to inform the 2026–2031 Business Strategy. Immediate priorities include enhancing outreach and awareness, modernizing digital services, exploring the introduction of provisional patent filings and reviewing funding structures in partnership with ISED. By acting on these insights, CIPO will better equip SMEs to protect their innovations and compete in a global economy increasingly defined by intangible assets.

