Meet Our Leadership Team



Rhonda Barnet, Interim Chief Executive Officer

Rhonda Barnet is the Interim CEO of DIGITAL, Canada's Global Innovation Cluster for digital technologies, and a Canadian business leader, entrepreneur, and corporate director who has spent more than 35 years helping organizations grow, innovate, and navigate change. From leading on the factory floor to the boardroom, her career has been defined by building resilient businesses, developing future-ready talent, and creating opportunities that strengthen Canada's economy.

As former CEO of Palette Skills, she led the launch of Upskill Canada, connecting untapped talent with employers in high-demand industries. Before that, as President and COO of AVIT Manufacturing, she helped scale a globally competitive manufacturing company while leading through growth and transformation.

Rhonda has always believed that great businesses succeed by investing in people. As the first woman to chair Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters (CME), she championed workforce development and helped expand opportunities for women in manufacturing, contributing to more than 41,000 new jobs. Her leadership has also shaped national innovation and industrial policy through roles with Canada's Industry Strategy Council, Next Generation Manufacturing Canada (NGen), and other leading organizations.

Today, Rhonda continues to champion Canadian innovation, commercialization, and talent development. Whether leading organizations, advising boards, mentoring executives, or contributing to global conversations through the World Economic Forum and World Manufacturing Forum, she is passionate about building organizations, and an economy, that are innovative, inclusive, and built for the future.



Elysa Darling, **Chief Operating Officer**

Elysa is the Chief Operating Officer at DIGITAL, where she leads Operations and Public Affairs, spanning marketing and communications, partnerships, and government relations. Her work focuses on helping Canadian technology companies scale and compete globally through strategic execution and cross-sector collaboration. She is known for navigating complex, multi-stakeholder environments and driving initiatives that unlock capital, build deep relationships, and accelerate innovation.

Previously, Elysa served as Director of Communications and Director of Government and Public Affairs at DIGITAL, where she led the successful effort to secure a $750 million reinvestment in the Global Innovation Clusters Program through Budget 2022, mobilizing federal support to expand commercialization pathways for Canadian tech companies.

Her background includes practicing law in the First Nations corporate commercial group at a leading regional firm, advising Indigenous businesses on governance and growth. She also co-developed and taught the Indigenous Business Law course at the University of Calgary Faculty of Law. Prior to joining DIGITAL, Elysa was a Senior Communications Consultant at a tech-focused public affairs firm, supporting innovation driven clients in engaging policymakers and scaling their impact.

Elysa was recognized with the Peak Emerging Leader Award in 2023 and named one of Toast & BetaKit's Top 25 Women in Tech in 2025. She also serves on several local community boards, contributing her expertise to initiatives that strengthen regional innovation and inclusion.



Nadia Shaikh-Naeem, Vice President, Programs

Nadia Shaikh-Naeem is Vice President of Programs at DIGITAL, where she leads one of Canada's largest innovation portfolios, overseeing more than $780 million in strategic investments across artificial intelligence, sustainable industry, digital health, and workforce transformation. She drives program strategy, investment execution, and portfolio performance, ensuring initiatives turn national priorities into commercially viable solutions that strengthen Canada's innovation capacity and global competitiveness. Under her leadership, DIGITAL has become one of the country's most effective innovation platforms, leveraging $358 million in public funding to generate over $4 billion in GDP, representing a 12 times return on investment.

Nadia is a recognized leader in responsible technology and digital transformation. She works across industry, government, and academia to enable the adoption and commercialization of emerging technologies while advancing Canadian intellectual property and long-term economic growth. She believes that technology, when deployed responsibly and meaningfully, can create measurable social impact and improve outcomes for communities and industries. She is a frequent speaker and moderator on responsible AI, commercialization, and Canada's innovation ecosystem, contributing to national and global conversations on the future of technology.

Prior to joining DIGITAL, Nadia held senior consulting and operational leadership roles delivering enterprise transformation, data governance, and large-scale technology enabled programs across North America, Europe, and Asia. Her work included launching financial institutions, implementing enterprise systems, leading complex change initiatives, and managing multimillion-dollar portfolios. She also co-founded a mobile technology startup focused on cross-cultural learning, where she led product development and operational strategy.

Nadia holds a Bachelor of Engineering in Computer Engineering from McGill University and a Master of Education in Adult Literacy and Global Change from the University of British Columbia and is a certified Project Management Professional through the Project Management

Institute. She brings a multidisciplinary perspective that integrates technology, governance, and human-centered design to advance innovation that is both transformative and responsible. In addition to her professional work, Nadia is an active community contributor and mentor, supporting initiatives that strengthen communities, expand access to opportunity, and foster inclusive environments.



Atish Kara, Vice President, Finance

Atish is the Vice President of Finance at DIGITAL, where he leads financial reporting, regulatory compliance, and day-to-day accounting operations. Known for being appointed to businesses in the midst of transition, he brings a track record of stepping into complex situations and delivering measurable results.

Prior to joining DIGITAL, Atish served as CFO to one of Bidvest South Africa's subsidiaries as well as advising the turnaround of Massmart SA, a Walmart subsidiary.

His background spans FP&A and executive finance roles across industries, including medical waste management, digital media, and consumer retail, with experience managing multi-company integrations and building financial governance from the ground up. Atish qualified as a Chartered Accountant in South Africa and obtained a CPA designation after relocating to Vancouver.



Laurel Buss, Vice President of Government Relations

Laurel is the Vice President of Government Relations at DIGITAL, where she leads the organization's government relations and public policy strategy and advises executive leadership on government engagement, external affairs, and strategic priorities in support of Canada's innovation economy.

With more than 17 years of experience spanning public affairs, communications, and government relations, Laurel is passionate about building trusted relationships, navigating complex issues, and helping leaders and organizations succeed. Prior to joining DIGITAL, she managed the communications team at Engineers and Geoscientists BC, where she also advanced public affairs initiatives and advocated for legislative amendments to the Engineers and Geoscientists Act. Laurel holds a Bachelor of Communications in Public Relations from Mount Royal University.

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Serena Nguyen, Chief Development Officer (Parental Leave)

Serena brings 15 years of cross-sector leadership spanning corporate, startup, and nonprofit environments. She has held senior leadership roles at MaRS Discovery District, Microsoft for Startups, and served as the Founding Executive Director of the Coalition of Innovation Leaders Against Racism (CILAR). At CILAR she led the Inclusive-Innovation-as-a-Service strategic pivot with Fortune 500 leaders across Canada's innovation economy, including Google, Siemens, JP Morgan Chase, TD Bank, HP Canada, among others. Her work has focused on corporate development, driving economic impact through ecosystem design, deepening industry collaboration, and scaling innovation models.

She's also the Co-Founder of The Undertow, a platform for ocean-sustainability, Founder of Evolve Oceans, and a published children's book author.

Serena currently serves on the Board of Career Edge, the Women Founders & Owners' Sub-Committee at Invest Ottawa, is part of the National Advisory Board for Canada's Forest Trust Corporation and is a business coach for early-stage startups with Sustainable Ocean Alliance (SOA). Her work reflects her commitment to building ecosystems that elevate capacity for innovation while advancing economic, social, and environmental progress across Canada. She was recently recognized as a 2024 Woman of the Year at DMZ's Innovation Summit for her contributions in Canada's innovation ecosystem.