

Bridging the Digital Divide: Digital Transformation Across the Non-Profit Sector

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On February 5, I had the privilege of moderating a panel called *Bridging the Digital Divide: Digital Transformation Across the Non-Profit Sector*. I was joined by funders, corporations and non-profit leaders who have spent the past year consulting with community leaders about the effects of COVID-19 on service delivery and the various digital gaps they are facing.

While most non-profits are already innovating and transitioning to digital service delivery, our discussion provided clarity that across every sector, the digital divide has become even more pronounced as the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns became a reality. In my experience working across sectors, hybrid cloud and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are the two dominant forces driving this transformation and these technologies can support organizations to reduce costs and accelerate their digital transformation.

Since the start of the pandemic, over 50 per cent of charities have transitioned in-person programs online and over 40 per cent have developed completely new programs in response to need, according to [Imagine Canada's Sector Monitor Report](#). Canadian non-profits and charities are facing an abrupt loss of revenue, impacting operations that many rely on. This includes cancellation of fundraising events, closure of offices and pausing of programs and services. Though these issues are not new, they have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and non-profit leaders are deeply concerned about the capacity of their organizations to carry on with their missions amid the crisis.

I was joined by Simona Ramkisson from the Wikimedia Foundation and Jesse Bourns from Ajah to drive the context and provide clarity on a path forward. While they acknowledged there was an immediate need to get online, Simona raised the question of whether digital programs were being designed at literacy levels of those actually being serviced. At IBM, we encourage a culture of continuous learning and have long advanced the idea that you don't need a traditional degree to get a job at IBM. But what happens when programs and platforms are made in a way that doesn't put people at the centre of design?

Last Fall, IBM began a design process with the intention of developing a shared vision for aligning and mobilizing resources to address the digital divide. The process was led by a team of IBM employees and involved numerous stakeholders and experts from across the non-profit sector in Canada. This early work seeded and boosted interest across numerous organizations in Canada to begin to tackle pieces of the problem. The process also surfaced a number of challenges and considerations, including the intersection of the digital divide and existing inequities in the non-profit sector, that will need to be included in ongoing work.

As Andrea Dicks, President of Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) stated: "Solutions are best found in communities, by communities." Andrea went on to explain that barriers are influenced by finances, geography, age and socio-economic status and that while upskilling is essential, it won't address the inequity faced by people accessing essential services across the non-profit sector. Mark Beckles, VP Social Impact and Innovation at RBC built on this point by highlighting the democratization of tools so that people have universal access to platforms, skills development and infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic really unmasked the long-held belief that technology was truly accessible to everyone, when it's not.

In response to the growing digital divide, a group of Canadian funders and corporations have joined to form the Digital Transformation Collaborative. Led by Canadian Tire Jumpstart, Community Foundations of Canada (CFC), IBM Canada, Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) and Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), the collaborative has made an initial financial and in-kind investment totalling \$600,000 to address pre-existing digital and technology gaps revealed by the pandemic. Future plans include additional funding to support access to digital learning platforms, mentorship and professional skills.

The collaborative will work with community-based consultants to address broad gaps including:

- Access to digital skills
- Access to internet connectivity, hardware and software
- Access to tools and infrastructure
- Access to funding for digital transformation

As we approach one year of the first COVID-19 lockdown in Canada, we felt it was important to highlight the resiliency of the non-profit sector and initiate a national dialogue through this panel discussion. More importantly, we are seeking support from more Canadian organizations to help build long-term sustainable strategy, engage community stakeholders and mobilize additional capital to support access to digital learning platforms, mentorship and professional skills.

Innovation cannot stop in a crisis and has to be central to how people, organizations and government are responding to the pandemic. We are witnessing the acceleration of digital transformation across all industries in Canada as a result of the pandemic and there is an urgent need to discuss current challenges and ways forward across the non-profit sector to help close the digital divide. I hope you'll join us in this mission.

If you missed our conversation, please take a moment to register and watch the replay here: <https://event.on24.com/wcc/r/2871978/4BDA5BA6B379D316208537CA09EE21D8>

**This blog combines the perspectives of leaders from Ajah, the Community Foundation of Canada, Canadian Tire Jumpstart, Ontario Trillium Foundation, Royal Bank of Canada, Wikimedia Foundation and IBM Canada.*

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