

# • C A N A D I A N • DIVERSITY

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## LETTERS

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We want to hear from you!

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## INTRODUCTION

# 25 YEARS OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE SETTLEMENT SECTOR: PAST, PRESENT AND POSSIBLE FUTURES

Over the past almost-thirty years **MARCO CAMPANA** has worked in some form of newcomer-serving sector role in communications and digital services, from frontline client service to the first Settlement.Org Content Coordinator. He created and managed the Settlement AtWork site, launching OCASI's Learn AtWork online learning site for sector workers, and has participated in a number of efforts to enhance sector knowledge mobilization. He led digital/social media strategy work at Maytree, and currently works as a freelance consultant helping agencies harness technology in client service delivery. His current focus is on digital transformation, digital inclusion/equity, demystifying technology in social services/social change, immigration, diversity and inclusion in Toronto.

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The articles you're about to read should provide you with some inspiration and ideas. You should want to learn more about the projects and research. Hopefully they will encourage you to share what you're working on. There is so much innovation in our sector. Too much of it stays under the radar. With this publication, we're looking to reveal some of the innovation to you. Let's make this a starting point for an ongoing sector conversation.

**“There is so much innovation in our sector. Too much of it stays under the radar.”**

I'm grateful to the people who took the time to share their work. What they see as future needs. Where they think digital, hybrid, blended, tech are going in the Immigrant and Refugee-serving sector. But they're not just thinking about it. They're sharing what they've learned and continue to learn. They're building that future.

You might be wondering about the title of this introduction. It's true. We've been doing this for two and a half decades. More than that. I can trace digital transformation as a deep

conversation to the 1997 “Computerization Project” in Ontario. In 1997, IRCC (then CIC)'s Ontario regional office initiated a Computerization Project. It sought to build the capacity of agencies delivering settlement, community connection, and language programs. Every worker got a computer. Every agency got a high-speed internet connection. Staff and managers were trained. Settlement.Org was born.

The sector in Ontario was digitally transformed, en masse.

Today we're asking many of the same questions and having the same discussions the project evaluation identified. We're still waiting for some answers. This issue of Canadian Diversity provides some of those answers.

Our authors all land on one core theme:

Technology is about people.

Wait, what?

Yes. You. Newcomers. All of us.

We need to ensure that the interests, needs, capabilities, and

readiness of frontline workers are put front and centre. We also need to put the interests, needs, capabilities, and readiness of Newcomers right beside them. Every article here has information about how to approach digital transformation with this people-first lens. Understanding who you're digitally transforming for and why is the right starting point to ensure success.

What else will you learn from reading these insightful articles?

You don't have to start from scratch when it comes to technology. Even when it comes to the latest and most talked about tech, AI, we have lessons for you. It's about people first, then tech. Aimee Holmes and Farrah Nakhaie have your AI starting points.

We can learn from others who are sector-adjacent. Ibukun-Oluwa Abejirinde and her fellow authors represent the health sector. Digital transformation is a conversation about care, but also takes place in a framework with high regulatory and patient-centred expectations.

Being Newcomer-centric means meeting Newcomers where they are when it comes to technology. This is key to how we approach digital transformation. Louisa Taylor and her team will tell you why you need to use the digital messaging tools Newcomers are using. Jennifer Freeman will outline how you can develop mobile apps as solutions. But success only comes if you develop alongside the people who will use them.

Apps are interesting, sure. Making sure you build with the entire mobile ecosystem in mind is, as Lisa Rochman and Whitney Loewen write, essential. Evaluating, learning from digital projects, and building on each other's work and efforts are also essential. Everyone here is building in the open. You can access their tools, their apps, and their reports. They'll talk to you if you reach out! That's an important point that Rochman and Loewen make. Sharing means you can build on each other's work instead of replicating. Our entire sector can learn from the Open Educational Resource (OER) design approach they describe. Build and share for replication and sustainability.

**“Evaluating, learning from digital projects, and building on each other's work and efforts are also essential. Everyone here is building in the open.”**

Replication and sustainability are interesting to me. When it comes to technology, we tend to be funded for projects. Tactics get funded, not core support. But that's what digital transformation requires. Core support. We're also not funded for success. Because what happens if your digital project is a success? You need more resources. Would that we had learned from that Computerization Project over 25 years ago. Digital

transformation is core to our work and must become core to our funding models too. As it grows, so too must our resource base.

In part, because roles are changing and emerging. Anthony Caldwell and Bo Ning tell you what digital transformation looks like at one of Canada's most digitally mature Settlement organizations. As they put it, digital transformation is a marathon. One that requires new ways of working. New ways of thinking. Iterating and innovating. New roles. Digital navigators are a new role, which they have implemented and outlined excellently. But, you know what? Every frontline worker is becoming a Digital Navigator in some way. Navigating tech for themselves, and for the Newcomers and communities they serve.

An example of that is the UK-based Digital Champions model ACS-Metropolis has imported for replication in our sector. Sarah Kooi and her co-authors from Scotland and Nova Scotia reinforce this shift in frontline worker competencies, and also provide us with a model that we can replicate and build on. Learn more here about what a Digital Champions approach is and why it makes sense for our sector.

When you hear Nick Noorani's name, you probably recognize him as a champion of Newcomers. He's also a tech entrepreneur. He represents the dozens of Newcomer-driven and developed digital solutions that are being worked on with and alongside the sector. People like Nick are creating digital solutions for Newcomers whether you work with them or not.

So, what's the right way forward? It means having the right external inputs and supports, led and controlled by us. Putting people first. Embracing, sharing, and replicating our natural innovation. Meeting people where they are. Building incrementally on our experiences. Iterating what works. Innovating with care and compassion.

Not everything has to be about disruption. Except for our funding models. It's time to disrupt funding models, so we can move towards digital transformation that is actually sustainable.

So what's next? As Freeman outlines, we need to inform, invest, and incentivize.

Or, what Alan Broadbent from Maytree called the three I's of immigrant integration: intentionality, instruments and investments. We need to be strategic, we need to be *intentional* about what we're doing. We need to have the right *instruments*, tactics, or technologies to address what we're being intentional about. And we need *investments* in those instruments and in that strategy to make it happen. All that while being Newcomer-centric, understanding newcomers and communities (also known as being "data centric"). Understanding their needs, assets, preferences, and challenges. Following the three

It's makes our technology and service intervention decisions much easier.

We need *all of that* built on a solid understanding of who we are as a sector, and who we are serving. Let's get that right. If we do, digital transformation won't feel overwhelming and out of our control and oversight. It will feel inevitable and important to get right.

Your peers and colleagues here offer you insights for our digital transformation roadmap. This is a conversation that needs to happen at scale in the Immigrant and

Refugee-serving sector. It is core to the future of our sector and how we work and serve. It needs to involve everyone from frontline workers, middle management, to leadership, to funders, with Newcomers at the centre. It takes time, effort, and investment.

But we need to be intentional about it. There is much wisdom in the room. Huge amounts of experience. It's time to tap into it, together.

Imagine the conversation we could have in another 25 years if we get it right this time.

# USING AI TO ENHANCE SERVICE DELIVERY

**AIMEE HOLMES** is Director, Data Governance and Application Services at ACCES Employment. She is passionate about empowering teams to use virtual tools in service delivery and enhancing how information is gathered, shared, and made available to those who need it. Aimee leads the Online Services department at ACCES, a powerhouse team of professionals who lead an integrating an AI-based virtual assistant into service provision, train staff to use over a dozen platforms in programming, develop e-learning modules, and strategically evolve a Salesforce-based CRM to optimize it for the organization. Aimee has an MA in Global Studies.

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**In 2020, ACCES Employment launched a virtual assistant powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI) to enhance its online gateway to information and services. In the first two years, VERA (Virtual Employment and Resource Attendant) responded to over 130,000 inquiries about ACCES' events, programs and other frequently asked questions. VERA offers a viable point of entry to ACCES' services for jobseekers and employers. This article offers insights on the initial investment and ongoing resources needed to build and operate VERA, the unique role that it plays in ACCES' service delivery journey, and the benefits of using this technology.**

In the fall of 2020, ACCES Employment (ACCES) launched a virtual assistant powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI). VERA (Virtual Employment and Resource Attendant)<sup>1</sup>, responds to inquiries about our programs and services, helps users self-register for upcoming events, and offers resources that are relevant to users' queries. VERA is a chatbot interface on our website and operates behind the scenes within our Facebook Messenger app. She runs on IBM Watson Assistant and Discovery technology.

Between 2016 and 2019, ACCES received two generous grants from Accenture. The first grant gave us the ability to transform our digital infrastructure and offer more online resources for jobseekers. The second grant allowed us to build VERA to enhance our online gateway to service by offering website visitors an interactive experience. Although we started

working on VERA prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the timing for introducing such a tool was ideal as people became more accepting, if not expectant, of being able to access information and programming online.

To guide the design of VERA, ACCES staff provided valuable input regarding the tasks that a virtual assistant might perform. They identified routine tasks at the initial point of service, such as providing an overview of a specific program, conducting a basic eligibility assessment, registering clients for events, and responding to questions about what we offer and our locations.

In the first 2 years, VERA responded to over 130,000 inquiries, which we calculated to offset over 8,500 hours of staff time that would have been spent attending to these requests.

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1 <https://accesemployment.ca/find-resources/vera>



Ultimately, VERA's success will be reflected in our ability to convert online interactions into client registrations for service. We made two key decisions in pursuit of this goal. First, we structured the conversation to lead users to complete a contact form, so a team member can follow up with them. Second, we selected technology that integrates with our Salesforce-based CRM. The information VERA collects on the contact forms and event registrations is passed directly into our primary stakeholder database. Thus, staff are able to pursue client and employer leads from VERA, alongside the leads that come in through traditional channels. This also gives us the ability to track impact.

Approximately a quarter of all users who filled out a contact form on VERA, went on to become a client. This is a very strong conversion rate when compared to our other light-touch initial interventions. During this timeframe, 12% of all new clients first interacted with our organization through VERA.

During conversations with the virtual assistant, users can ask questions in their own words. VERA uses Natural Language Processing (NLP) to interpret these queries to find the most appropriate response from our library of more than 150 pre-composed answers. Each month, we review a sample of conversations to confirm the accuracy of VERA's responses and remediate where needed. This also provides insights on trends in user queries and whether we need to add new responses. For example, in 2022, we added a response about how ACCES supports refugees and those who have come to Canada under Emergency Travel Measures. Through Service Delivery Improvements (SDI) funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, we collaborated with CCS (Catholic Crosscultural Services) and OCASI (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants) to add 30 new responses

to common questions newcomers have on settlement topics such as short-term housing, and how to obtain a health card or driver's license. These responses include links to authoritative sources for further information and support.

Another goal we are pursuing with VERA through the SDI funding is to facilitate inter-agency referrals. We will gather clients' settlement-related needs during the initial conversation with VERA so that our staff will be aware of clients' needs and can make outbound referrals sooner. Staff at other organizations can use VERA on behalf of their clients to screen them for our services and will be able to make referrals through VERA too.

**“We will gather clients' settlement-related needs during the initial conversation with VERA so that our staff will be aware of clients' needs and can make outbound referrals sooner.”**

ACCES needs dedicated resources to maintain and enhance VERA. We have an internal team that ensures VERA is performing well and aligns with our current programming. The team also works with external vendors through enhancement projects and leads the ongoing communication with, and training of, staff to ensure they can capitalize on the leads that come in through this channel. IBM charges a subscription fee to use this technology.

For us, the benefits of this technology and the ongoing investment is clear. VERA plays an important role as a source of reliable information, a viable point of entry to ACCES' services, and a support to staff by handling routine tasks.

# IMPLEMENTING AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) PROJECT IN SETTLEMENT SERVICES REQUIRES AN ENGAGED AND INFORMED STAFF

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This article explores how to create team readiness for adoption of new AI tools in a service provider organization and how an informed and engaged staff ensures that AI adoption in settlement is consistent with organizational values.

At the WE Value Partnership, we are in the middle of what we aim to be the start of an AI journey. In partnership with the University of Windsor, we are exploring AI functionality in our settlement assessment and partner portal in the form of a recommendation system and chatbot. For effective decision-making and adoption of a new technology, our team has needed to become informed and engaged on issues around AI. We recommend developing a knowledge base for staff reference and engaging staff in regular discussion about relevant issues.

**“For effective decision-making and adoption of a new technology, our team has needed to become informed and engaged on issues around AI.”**

First, we developed a resource library for our team, with articles, videos, interactive training modules, and podcasts relevant to the AI project. To ensure usability, we focused on non-specialist resources that could be drawn on by a general audience. To ensure speed of access, we organized the articles around the themes most important to our project (e.g., business needs, fairness, chatbots). We included short summaries

for each resource, allowing staff to easily overview the main focus and points of any resource to determine the relevance of the rest of the article. This library is updated regularly by a designated staff member, with other staff able to provide additions if found. The library provides a foundation for staff understanding of AI's potential, risks, and limits, as well as where AI currently sits in our sector.

Active engagement, however, is needed to mobilize this knowledge. Carving out time dedicated exclusively to professional development on AI can be difficult with the time demands that are on our staff. To respond to this limit on available time, it helps to repurpose other meetings for periodic discussions relevant to staff. For example, our staff has weekly meetings where we share information and ask questions related to all different aspects of their work. We have identified these meetings as a perfect space for brief presentations and discussions on AI. This has the further benefit of presenting AI issues as part of rather than separate from the workflows and ideas that are regularly engaged with at our meetings.

Together, this knowledge base and engagement support expectation setting around AI. AI is more mythologized than grounded in practice for many. The benefits and risks can be

exaggerated in common discourse and media publications; what is actually, tangibly possible for an NGO to implement with their resources and datasets is less so. A space for the discussion of desires and assumptions ensures that everyone knows what our AI project can and cannot do.

**“AI amplifies everything: its promise and its threat is that it scales everything we put into it.”**

Perhaps even more importantly, keeping staff informed and engaged keeps our AI project consistent with our organization's values. AI amplifies everything: its promise and its threat is that it scales everything we put into it. An AI's capacity for harm is unmatched by a human's capacity for the same because an AI can replicate that harm infinitely. The same is true of AI's capacity to help. AI implementation can be seen as a question of amplification: What do you want more of? And what do you not want more of, but that could be hiding in your work if you are not very careful with what you are doing?

Staff are essential to help answer these questions as our organization's heart: they are what sets an organization's

values. Knowledge and support for discussion enable them to do so. An informed staff that understands the capabilities, limits, and risks of AI can participate at every step of the process. In conceptualization, they can provide user stories and suggestions that steer development towards where AI can do the most good and can provide early warning of its harms. In development, they can identify where a project has gone astray and make suggestions for alternatives, identifying risks in data sources or models. In implementation, an informed and empowered staff can identify and report issues as they arise. This last is most vital, because when development is done and the AI is in active use, any issues could become very real for very many people if they are not quickly identified and corrected. It is staff, working with technology and clients every day, who are in the best position to catch problems as they emerge.

As our partnership continues to explore AI, and as AI finds wider and more embedded use in business, we will explore new projects and new methods of implementation. The foundation for all of these projects must be an informed, engaged staff who are able to have faith in each project and advocate for our organization's values.

# BEYOND TECHNOLOGY: DIGITAL HEALTH COMPASSION FOR CANADIAN IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

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Community health centres and settlement providers in Canada embraced rapid uptake of digital health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. While virtual care such as telephone and video health encounters has been largely applauded, there is a need to consider and address its impact on the relational aspects of care and on (in) equitable access and outcomes for marginalized groups such as immigrants and refugees. This article makes a case for understanding the experience and needs of immigrants and refugees with using virtual care in relation to its ability to deliver compassionate care—that is, characterized by trust, dignity, positive patient-provider relationship, empathy, and respect. Authors propose using intersectionality as a framework for this inquiry. By understanding if and how immigrants and refugees experience virtual care through a compassionate lens, we can ensure that their perspectives and needs influence how we design systems of care.

## THE ERA OF DIGITAL HEALTH

The COVID-19 pandemic was a wakeup call in health care and a reminder of the need to rethink how we design and deliver health services in equitable and quality-enhancing ways. Remote interactions between patients and their care providers facilitated by communication or information technologies, i.e., virtual care, became the preferred modality for non-emergency, non-tactile health visits.<sup>1</sup> Over the last three years, community health centres and settlement providers adopted

and integrated virtual care solutions to ensure continuity of services for immigrants and refugees<sup>2</sup>, whilst trying to maintain quality and effectiveness. For many organizations, this transition was rapid.<sup>3</sup> Between March 2020 and 2021, virtual care represented as much as 40% of all health care provider visits in Canada.<sup>4</sup> Most of these were telephone visits, followed closely by video visits.

Reports on the experiences of virtual care have been largely positive—applauding its convenience, ease of use, and

access.<sup>25</sup> However, the pandemic has shown us that benefits and disadvantages tend to settle along existing socioeconomic fault lines. Inequities in virtual care access and outcomes were experienced by marginalized communities, including those living in rural areas, the urban poor, Indigenous peoples, racialized communities, and refugees<sup>6,7</sup> as a result of factors such as low access to hardware, limited digital skills, and barriers to privacy and safety.<sup>8,9</sup> A Europe-wide evidence review found that marginalized groups and those who do not speak the dominant language experience reduced access, use, and engagement with digital services.<sup>10</sup>

Over the past decade, the number of immigrants and refugees globally and in Canada has increased dramatically. In 2022 alone, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada approved over 437,000 applications for permanent resident status<sup>11</sup> and processed nearly 82,000 refugees and refugee claimants.<sup>12</sup> Best estimates suggest there are approximately 500,000 persons with precarious immigration status in Canada.<sup>13</sup> With immigrants and refugees accounting for nearly one-quarter of Canada's population<sup>14</sup>, this shift in population demographics presents new opportunities for innovation within health care, such as the use of digital technologies (i.e., digital health).

**“Best estimates suggest there are approximately 500,000 persons with precarious immigration status in Canada.”**

Integration into the host country and navigating multiple health and social structures (housing, education, employment, financial services, etc.) can be difficult for newcomers, and contributes to post-migration stress.<sup>15,16</sup> Digitally enabled information supports, and digitized processes can be convenient, easy to scale, and more readily accessible than conventional supports.

As we reflect on lessons from the pandemic response and look forward to post-pandemic recovery, and as virtual interventions become mainstream in health care,<sup>17</sup> it is critical to leave no one behind.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, how do we take into account the needs and unique experiences of migrants and refugees and ensure a positive settlement and healthcare experience by leveraging digital technology?

## DIGITAL HEALTH COMPASSION: IS VIRTUAL CARE A BRIDGE OR A WALL?

Concerns surrounding the increasing use of digital health technologies range from fears that it will usurp the role of health providers to the possibility of it amplifying social inequities.<sup>19</sup> Another important consideration is its impact on the relational aspects of care.

The therapeutic alliance—i.e., mutual, cooperative, and safe interaction between the care provider and patient—is critical to patient-centred and quality care.<sup>20</sup> It is related to trust, psychological safety, intentional listening, cultural humility, and open communication. However, while digital health can be a bridge, making connections between patients and providers easier, it can also be a cold brick wall, obstructing the relational aspects of care.<sup>2</sup> For example, establishing and maintaining the therapeutic alliance was one of the main barriers to providing virtual mental health for refugees in Canada.<sup>21</sup> An unintended effect of virtual care, therefore, is that it can interfere with trust and communication. Hence, the principle of compassion is central to the delivery of quality virtual care.

**“Mainstream approaches to conceptualizing compassionate care do not often consider the positionality and unique experiences of complex populations and those who have been made vulnerable by migration.”**

The book *Without Compassion, There Is No Healthcare*, emphasizes compassion as being integral to digital transformation in healthcare.<sup>22</sup> Compassion, defined as “a state of concern for the suffering or unmet need of another, coupled with a desire to alleviate that suffering”,<sup>23</sup> has also been recognised as a metric of quality care. Common descriptors of compassionate care include trust, dignity, positive patient-provider relationships, empathy, and respect, and often result in improved healthcare experiences and outcomes.<sup>24</sup> A common assumption, however, is that compassion means the same thing to everyone. On the contrary; compassion is a dynamic, multidimensional concept subject to individual expectations and experiences.<sup>25</sup> Paton et al., note that “...the meaning of compassion must be considered from multiple perspectives, not imposed by those empowered to define suffering and provide care.”<sup>26</sup> Mainstream approaches to conceptualizing compassionate care do not often consider the positionality and unique experiences of complex populations and those who have been made vulnerable by migration. So how do we make compassion central to virtual care when working with immigrants and refugees?

## OPERATIONALIZING DIGITAL HEALTH COMPASSION FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

The rapid shift towards virtualization of health care demands that the perspectives of immigrants and refugees influence how we design systems of care. Differences in cultural norms and practices, language, and skills can shape engagement with digital technologies<sup>27</sup> and how individuals experience

compassionate care.<sup>28</sup> In some cultures, for example, a health care visit without physical examination may not be trusted.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, compared to the general population, newcomer groups and those with complex social needs may not be as comfortable with or able to access virtual care.<sup>29</sup> It is therefore relevant to explore if and how the digitization of health care impacts the experience of compassionate care for marginalized groups, including immigrants and refugees.

To understand how new innovations and measures affect any population group, it is helpful to first recognize that ethnocultural, environmental, socio-cultural, and economic attributes do not manifest in silos and can be better understood collectively using an intersectional lens. Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how multiple social identities (e.g., race, class, gender, ability, etc.) interact in ways that are interdependent and reinforce privilege or oppression.<sup>30</sup> An intersectional lens will, for example, show that the experiences of an individual who is a migrant and identifies as a woman cannot be understood from the additive perspective, that is, first as a migrant and then as a woman. Rather, the juncture at which these two identities intersect reveal the root of subtle and complex factors that shape the experiences of an immigrant woman. Intersectionality can therefore help us better understand how multiple identities cumulatively influence newcomers' experiences of compassionate care in virtual interactions.

Emotional, physical, psychological, social and systemic circumstances particular to their migration status may intersect with other social categorizations such as ethnicity/race, gender, education, religion, literacy, and thereby modify their experiences of virtual care and their views on digital health compassion. For example, economic immigrants with full legal immigration status may enjoy access to health care and other social protections that are not readily available to those with precarious immigration status. Furthermore, while immigrants generally move by choice, refugees are forced to flee from persecution and/or trauma, enduring stressors that may not be present for other migrant groups. In such cases, their distrust of systems of authority may hamper their experiences of virtual care.

Current strategies to overcome ways in which digital technology may depersonalize the care experience include training in cultural humility and unconscious bias.<sup>31</sup> Generic guidelines have been developed that include practical suggestions for making the virtual experience more relational.<sup>32</sup> These guidelines include eye contact, clear articulation, and ensuring interpreter support, amongst other strategies. None of the recommendations, however, speak directly to the nuances that immigrants and refugees may be grappling with. Interestingly, a multi-provincial study on virtual mental health for refugees reported that some users did not want an interpreter, as it interrupted direct communication with the provider even when they did not fully understand what the provider said.<sup>21</sup>

For this group, although it seems counter-intuitive, deviation from the standard guidelines constituted compassionate care.

**“It is crucial to first understand the needs and expectations that immigrants and refugees have for compassionate care, and how the virtual care encounter can be re-imagined to achieve this.”**

To support equitable access to compassionate care and ensure newcomers reap digital dividends, health care practitioners and organizations must be aware of the bridge versus wall effect of virtual care and more broadly, digital health. It is crucial to first understand the needs and expectations that immigrants and refugees have for compassionate care, and how the virtual care encounter can be re-imagined to achieve this. Our team is working closely with three community primary care settings in Toronto that provide health and social services to newcomer groups, to understand if and how immigrants and refugees experience virtual care through a compassionate lens. Study findings will inform strategies for delivering compassionate health care virtually to Canadian newcomers. Working in health care mandates that we are mindful of groups that are excluded in the fast-paced digital transformation agenda, and that we ensure their views and needs are brought to the forefront when designing virtual care.

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# SETTLEMENT INFORMATION IN A GROUP CHAT: TURNING A POPULAR MODE OF COMMUNICATION INTO A POWERFUL TOOL FOR INTEGRATION

**LOUISA TAYLOR** is co-founder and director of Refugee 613, a Canadian non-profit organization dedicated to improving the welcome and integration of refugees through better communications. Previously a writer and editor for Canadian and international publications for more than 20 years, Louisa also provides strategic communications advice to people and organizations working for social change.

**WAZHMA FROGH** is the Community Manager of Refugee 613's Afghan Digital Service. A former human rights lawyer from Afghanistan, Wazhma came to Canada with more than two decades of work in supporting women and children in Afghanistan and the South Asian region. Wazhma is a trained practitioner in Women, Peace and Security issues and for the past 5 years in Canada has shifted her focus to providing settlement and system navigation support to newcomers and refugees.

**NARGIS EHSAN** is a Digital Content Specialist with Refugee 613. She creates settlement content in Pashto and Dari for Afghan newcomers and responds to their questions through the Afghan Digital Service. Nargis holds a Bachelor in Business Administration with a concentration in Operations Management from the American University of Afghanistan. She came to Canada in late 2021 from Afghanistan.

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Many newcomers struggle to find information to help navigate their first months and years in Canada. Refugee 613's Digital Messaging for Settlement and Integration (DMSI) project has explored the benefits of addressing this challenge by offering newcomers free, easy and fast access to settlement information in their own language and customized to their needs, via off-the-shelf apps on their smartphones. This article discusses the learning from the latest DMSI pilot, the Afghan Digital Service, which uses a private, moderated group on Telegram to provide key settlement information to more than 700 Afghan newcomers.

A woman found a shelter in her community to support her as she left a violent partner. A refugee family in a financial crisis reconnected with the settlement agency that held their file. A mother learned about culturally-relevant mental health services for her troubled son. And a man discovered a training program that led to a job in a lucrative new field.

What these stories have in common is they all happened because these newcomers to Canada belong to a simple,

cost-effective and moderated group chat on Telegram, run by Refugee 613.

The Afghan Digital Service (ADS) is a pilot designed to explore the question: can you effectively supplement one-on-one case management for refugee newcomers from the same language group, spread across Canada, by having settlement workers answering basic questions and making referrals via a private group on a digital messaging app? One year in, in

spite of some challenges with promotion, the evidence is pointing strongly to Yes. Clients report that the ADS has not only made it easier and more convenient for them to find key information, but it has increased their uptake of services and improved their ability to navigate life in Canada on their own.

IRCC spends more than \$134 million on information and orientation services. It's one of the biggest areas of funded service, and highly popular with clients. Settlement information exists on countless government and agency web sites and in workshops, webinars and guides. And yet, many newcomers still struggle to get the information they need, when they need it, in a format that's accessible. So they turn to family and friends, often sharing advice and information in community group chats on WhatsApp, Facebook or other platforms. According to MTM Newcomers, an annual survey of newcomer media habits, the majority of newcomers have access to a smartphone and they are "more likely to use a smartphone than any other device to perform searches" (Media Technology Monitor, 2023).

**“Settlement information exists on countless government and agency web sites and in workshops, webinars and guides. And yet, many newcomers still struggle to get the information they need, when they need it, in a format that's accessible.”**

These online groups are often incredibly powerful and important resources. But when Refugee 613 noticed that Syrian refugee newcomers to Ottawa were often getting incorrect or misleading advice in informal WhatsApp groups, we started our own, complimentary group on WhatsApp (later migrating to Telegram in response to client preference). The model offered a professionally-moderated space for members to ask basic settlement-related questions in Arabic during regular business hours, and get referrals and advice for navigating services. The group grew to 500 members at its peak.

According to an evaluation in 2018, 85% of members used the group at least once a day. 81% of members used the group to gather information about government services, and 78% of members used the group to obtain information related to immigration and refugee status in Canada. They reported that the group helped them save time and money and navigate the settlement system. They appreciated it as a centralized source of information that answered their questions quickly and efficiently. Five years later, the group lives on, now moderated by volunteers trained by Refugee 613.

Recognizing the information needs of Afghan newcomers arriving in 2021, Refugee 613 proposed a pilot to IRCC to see whether this success could be replicated at the national level. The Telegram group name translates to Refugee 613

- Information for Life in Canada. Clients can post an inquiry at any time of day and get an answer the same day—often within the hour—for common questions (“Can you please tell me who in Vancouver can help me get my university degree assessed?”), and no later than 48 hours for more complicated ones that require some research. They're also able to ask sensitive questions via private message or voice note. Before joining, clients must agree to abide by formal Community Guidelines on behavior and safety, and have the option to shield their name and phone number from the rest of the group to protect their privacy.

Refugee 613 staff compile and share several new posts about life in Canada every week, ranging from detailed explainers about credit and debit cards to simple summaries of new national dental benefits or special measures for Afghan resettlement, translated into both Dari and Pashto with additional context where needed, and links to learn more. Moderators also share notices about settlement-sector events in various cities, including workshops, training programs and language classes.

Since the formal launch in March, 2022, moderators have answered more than 2,000 inquiries, made more than 1,000 referrals to service providers and posted more than 900 separate pieces of new content. In a recent unpublished survey, a majority of clients said their ability to find settlement information improved once they joined the group and the percentage rating their knowledge of services as “Good” jumped from 8% before joining, to 43% after.

Anecdotally, refugee clients report that trauma and the overwhelm of the journey make it difficult to retain what they learn in traditional orientation sessions delivered on arrival, after which it can be a struggle to get questions answered by overworked case managers. We've learned that meeting this newcomer audience where they are – on their phones – helps to reduce frustration, close gaps and enhance traditional service delivery. It gives clients easy access to a trusted, up-to-date resource for answers to FAQs in their own languages, enabling them to learn at their own pace, and turn to other settlement services for more complex or specific needs.

**“We've learned that meeting this newcomer audience where they are—on their phones—helps to reduce frustration, close gaps and enhance traditional service delivery.”**

As of February, 2023, the group has 725 members in seven provinces, reaching an estimated 3,600 beneficiaries (as clients share what they learn in the group with an average of five other people) and growing by an average of 10 clients each week. Still, that is just a fraction of the 28,000 Afghans who have arrived in Canada since 2021, which highlights the pilot's greatest challenge. While some settlement staff have

embraced the service and see it as a trusted partner in supporting their clients, many others are wary of the digital model and do not refer clients to it or, worse, actively discourage their clients from joining. As a result, the majority of members say they found the group through family and friends. The service also has not yet overcome a digital gender divide: men make up the majority of members in the Telegram group, reflecting the reality that in many Afghan households, only the men have access to a smartphone.

**“We have learned that while digital messaging can help people find information sources more easily, it cannot make up for weak user experience with those sources.”**

Other challenges are outside our scope, but speak to wider issues around digital settlement information. We have learned that while digital messaging can help people find information sources more easily, it cannot make up for weak user experience with those sources. Regardless of their level of digital skills, clients often report struggling to navigate online resources not designed with the newcomer user in mind.

Refugees and newcomers need innovative solutions to settlement information needs, tools that go beyond the conventional service delivery models. Refugee 613's experience has shown that moderated digital messaging groups can be safe, effective and efficient tools. They do not replace the need for case workers and user-friendly web sites, but they support those with language barriers and increase their ability to independently find and use the information they need to make decisions about their life in Canada.

# ARRIVAL ADVISOR: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION LESSONS FROM A MOBILE APP

**JENNIFER FREEMAN** is CEO of PeaceGeeks. She has led the technology nonprofit's strategy to scale, working with newcomers, policymakers and nonprofit leaders to explore the enabling conditions for innovation and digital transformation to create more modern, efficient, human-centred migration systems. Prior to joining PeaceGeeks, Jen worked for the UN and international nonprofits in zones of conflict and refugee settlements, and spent 10 years leading programs at the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, and a professor at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies.

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At a time when the country is committing to significantly increase immigration targets, the push to create a more modern, efficient, open and agentic journeys for newcomers is more urgent than ever. New technology and hybrid service delivery will be central components of the sector's digital transformation. This article draws on PeaceGeeks' tech expertise and 6+ years developing and scaling Arrival Advisor (AA), an award-winning, multilingual mobile app that provides newcomers to Canada with recommended information and services tailored specifically to their needs, circumstances, and immigration status, to offer lessons learned, recommendations and potential risks for the sector and its main funder to consider at this time of rapid digital transformation.

Multiple research and policy reports have demonstrated the demand for and benefits of a 21st century digital settlement experience for newcomers to Canada.<sup>1</sup> At a time when the country is committing to significantly increasing immigration targets, the push to create a more modern, efficient, open and agentic journey for newcomers is more urgent than ever.

Five years ago, awareness of persistent information gaps led PeaceGeeks to build Arrival Advisor (AA), a mobile app that provides newcomers to Canada with recommended information and services tailored specifically to their needs, circumstances, and immigration status. Designed with newcomers, community service providers, and coordinating organizations, AA sought to increase accessibility of both pre- and post-arrival information through a free, trusted, multilingual, mobile app.

As of January 2023, Arrival Advisor has over 19,000 downloads, and around 1,000 monthly active users. In just over

three years since its launch, it has been downloaded by users in 153 countries.

Immigration Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and the sector are currently preparing for the federal Call for Proposals (CFP) in 2024, with a focus on the digital transformation of the sector. PeaceGeeks' experience developing and scaling Arrival Advisor offers a number of relevant insights, practically, for organizations seeking to develop digital tools, and for the government's strategy to successfully support digital transformation.

## ARRIVAL ADVISOR FROM DESIGN TO SCALE

At PeaceGeeks, over 80 per cent of our team are first generation or newcomer designers, product managers, and developers with lived experience of the challenges of finding

reliable, trusted and up-to-date information when arriving in a new country. According to the 2015 Vancouver Immigrant Survey, 1 in 3 newcomers were unaware of services and resources available to them. In 2016, seven municipal districts across the Lower Mainland identified access to information as a top barrier for immigrant resettlement.

Having worked with UNHCR to develop a multilingual service-mapping product for people fleeing conflict in Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey, PeaceGeeks queried whether a similar product would have value for newcomers to Canada.

In 2017 PeaceGeeks was one of 10 recipients of Google Canada's Impact Challenge award for Arrival Advisor. The flexible, innovation-focused grant allowed PeaceGeeks to spend 18 months working with advisory committees of newcomers, settlement partners, Local Immigration Partnerships, tech advisors and local government, to design, build and test the app. It launched in BC in March 2019, and scaled to Manitoba in January 2022. In November 2021, Arrival Advisor was one of 10 global recipients of the United Nations Intercultural Innovation Award, from the UN Alliance of Civilizations and BMW Group, and has been approached by governments and nonprofits in the US, UK, Poland, Germany and Finland to explore replication to other countries.

## GUIDEPOSTS AND PITFALLS

Through the process of developing Arrival Advisor, and in the course of working with settlement organizations keen to replicate similar solutions, recurring themes emerged, which offer strategic and practical focal points for the digital transformation of the sector:

## DESIGN

A central component for the creation of digital tools like Arrival Advisor, is the inclusion of robust user discovery, user interface (UI), and user experience (UX) design expertise. Principles of human-centered design (HCD) mirror concepts familiar to a settlement sector, such as client centricity. Human centered design involves continuously discovering and seeking to understand the perspective of the person who is experiencing the problem; then designing a useful solution which truly responds to their needs. HCD involves interacting with the user and bringing them in every step of the way. Arrival Advisor has relied on four advisory committees (Tech, Frontline, Newcomer and Strategic) for ideas, input and feedback to the design and ongoing feature development of the app.

Crucially, the HCD process extends beyond the rich skills and experience that settlement organizations bring from designing

**“Human centered design involves continuously discovering and seeking to understand the perspective of the person who is experiencing the problem; then designing a useful solution which truly responds to their needs.”**

and delivering client-centered programs offline. This is because including a digital interface changes the interaction. HCD requires first surfacing and checking assumptions of the client and the product team (in this case tech developers and settlement providers), and suspending our own experience of a user's problem offline, to allow for unknown variables to emerge once a technological interface is added. For example, a service provider could be familiar with client needs regarding first language mental health support. A desire to extend these supports to more clients in other regions may indicate an online platform as a possible solution. But in the absence of a discovery phase that explores e.g. a client's accessibility and trust in the security of digital platforms, moving a service online could prove an ineffective solution if users aren't comfortable discussing mental health over a computer.

## PARTNERSHIPS

A core differentiator in Arrival Advisor's concept was that it sought to avoid “reinventing the wheel” with respect to information that was already being created, and maintained from reliable, trusted sources. This required a large network of content and data partners to ensure the app could maintain relevance, with up-to-date information, and provide value to partners by publicizing their content to newcomer audiences in a high quality, continually improving and maintained app.

As PeaceGeeks is not a direct service provider, it was not incentivised to direct users to its own programs, but rather, be a neutral information source to allow newcomers to navigate information and services on the app from any/all local service providers.

As the sector embarks on building new platforms, there is a need to foster more mutually-beneficial partnerships with organizations both inside and outside the sector, and with newcomers not only at, but advising the table.

## FUNDING

From concept to build, successful technology must remain agile, with a commitment and investment in ongoing iteration and development. Digital tools that do not change and adapt to their users, to new technology, and as users' use of

those technologies changes, quickly and inevitably become obsolete.

This presents a particular challenge for nonprofits within the settlement sector, due to funding models which are often time-bound, project-based, and do not often provide the necessary flexibility to build effective technology. Particularly important will be the provision of funding for discovery (allowing certain outcomes to be decided post-award, rather than at the proposal stage), sustainable funding for long term development, and flexible funding that allows for continual iteration. Arrival Advisor has been fortunate to receive funding from a number of flexible, innovation-focused funds, which have been instrumental in our ability to maintain a roadmap for the app that continually listens to, and centers newcomers' pain points.

**“Particularly important will be the provision of funding for discovery (allowing certain outcomes to be decided post-award, rather than at the proposal stage), sustainable funding for long term development, and flexible funding that allows for continual iteration.”**

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF SETTLEMENT

- 1. Invest in the creation of a digital ecosystem.** A robust digital ecosystem ensures everyone is able to find the same accurate, up-to-date information anywhere they look. Government's concerted efforts to reduce duplication of funding can inadvertently result in a limited number of information silos, leaving other sources to become outdated and inaccurate, and opening space for confusion and misinformation to proliferate. Sources of truth can thus be strengthened by the funding of multi-channel digital dissemination across platforms, communities and languages.
- 2. A digital transformation requires changes to IRCC's grants and contribution system.** Grants to support the sector's digital transformation will need to be flexible enough to accommodate the design and sustainable, iterative development of technology and digital tools. In particular, funding for ongoing user testing will ensure digital tools stay effective and relevant to the needs of the user.
- 3. Incentivize collaboration and customization by funding interoperable systems.** One way to reduce competition and encourage collaboration, co-learning and customization is by funding tech systems to be interoperable.

## 4. Invest in systems to support future crises now.

Canada's commitment to support people affected by the humanitarian crises in Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine created urgent service and information needs. Following interviews with Ukrainian citizens pre- and post-arrival, PeaceGeeks was able to quickly add features to Arrival Advisor, such as a CUAET visa filter for services, and a Compare Canadian Cities tool to address Ukrainians' desire to compare cities based on their priorities. Digital resources can be adapted quickly and efficiently once built, and if invested in now, will be ready to support Canada's humanitarian response to future crises.

## CONCLUSION

As (IRCC) and the sector continue to deliberate the design of CFP 2024, Arrival Advisor's experience offers a number of insights into what has worked well, and what may be missing, as we continue on our audacious process of digital transformation.

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# CANADA'S SETTLEMENT SECTOR AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TECHNOLOGY AND SUSTAINABILITY

**LISA ROCHMAN** is the Vice Dean in the Faculty of Skills and Foundational Learning at NorQuest College in Edmonton, Alberta. She holds a PhD in Linguistics and has additional training in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Essential Skills and immigration matters. Lisa's portfolio focuses on programs, projects and research for foundational and post-secondary learners with an emphasis on language and settlement for newcomers and those who work in organizations that support them.

**WHITNEY LOEWEN** is the Manager of e-Learning and Special Projects with The Immigrant Education Society (TIES) in Calgary, Alberta. She joined TIES in 2016, when she began working with the LINC Home Study and LINC Blended programs, and today she manages the expansion of TIES' suite of e-Learning programs, including language and employment training funded at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels.

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What has the settlement sector learned from the COVID-19 pandemic? What knowledge do we want to carry into the future? Whitney Loewen (The Immigrant Education Society) and Lisa Rochman (NorQuest College) consider the need for innovation in online service post the COVID-19 pandemic, and propose sharing and dissemination of resources as the best approach to long-term project sustainability.

What has the settlement sector learned from the COVID-19 pandemic? What knowledge do we want to carry into the future?

For many of us, it might be the importance of a responsive service model, one that can be offered on-site or online and in a hurry. Further, it might be an awareness that we have a role to play in building digital literacy alongside traditional literacy, particularly as service-providing organizations (SPOs) and funders see the promise in online services. Many of us realized the impact of income disparity and unequal access to the internet at the height of social distancing, with many SPOs scrambling to open computer lending libraries that could facilitate learning from home. Building on these lessons, we propose that there may be a way for the settlement sector to create a responsive online service model that a) meets our newcomer clients where they are, on the devices they may

*“Many of us realized the impact of income disparity and unequal access to the internet at the height of social distancing, with many SPOs scrambling to open computer lending libraries that could facilitate learning from home.”*

already be using; and b) encourages sharing resources across the sector, reducing development burden, maintaining innovation, and ensuring training and supports are available. In this brief article we consider a few examples.

## MEETING CLIENTS WHERE THEY ARE

To realize our responsive online service model there should be

increased movement to meet newcomer clients where they are already, including on the digital platforms that they currently use, rather than expecting them to adapt to the rigid one-size-fits-all model typified by traditional e-learning. Traditionally, many SPOs put significant resources into onboarding clients into desktop-based e-learning, with most online programs designed to be accessed primarily from a laptop or desktop. This approach required significant resources for development and training during the COVID-19 pandemic, when SPOs and funders were tasked with assembling computer lending libraries for the many clients who did not have reliable access to their own device. Further, the system often correlated low digital literacy on a PC to low digital literacy across the board; many thousands of hours and dollars were invested in pandemic-era digital literacy training, with the primary goal to onboard clients to laptops and desktop computers.

**“While there is significant value in laptop and desktop computer literacy for future work or studies, not all newcomers require this type of training.”**

In fact, according to the Canadian Radio-Television and Communications Commission (2018), more than 95% of newcomers to Canada own a mobile smartphone, and they are more likely than Canadian citizens to use their devices for daily tasks such as online banking and video streaming (Solutions Research Group, 2019). While there is significant value in laptop and desktop computer literacy for future work or studies, not all newcomers require this type of training. So why are we not meeting our clients on the devices that they already own and know how to use? Would an alternative approach yield better results for clients and SPOs?

## DESIGNING LEARNING FOR ALTERNATIVE (MOBILE) MODELS

With respect to this question, The Immigrant Education Society (TIES) currently has three programs underway that are designed to study the impact of alternative online learning models. The HELLO (Hybrid Education Literacy Learning Optimization) Study is conducting comparative research on in-class, online, and hybrid training models and the unique challenges faced in each by LINC literacy-level clients. The ROSPI (Remote and Online Services for Professional Immigrants) research study is examining settlement service accessibility among immigrant professionals, and will evaluate a remote and online solution to identified service gaps (likely using smartphone technology).

Lastly, Bridge for Digital Youth (BDY) is studying the feasibility of smartphone-based employment training among

newcomer youth. Participants will take part in an entry-level digital marketing career training program from their phones, with synchronous weekly classes hosted on Zoom and asynchronous coursework completed via TIES' mobile-friendly Moodle learning management system. Research from all three pilots will be shared with the settlement sector, with the hope that other organizations will build on this work.

Of course, an increase in options and modalities can create confusion for SPOs and clients not familiar with e-learning. To that end, NorQuest College has developed a tool that will assist newcomers and service providers in making informed decisions regarding modality for settlement services and language learning. The tool's recommendations are based on four dimensions; skill, experience, interest, and access. Learning plans to help newcomers prepare to succeed through different service delivery modalities are also available in seven languages, and are available for any organization to use. A corresponding digital literacy tool for settlement service practitioners can guide settlement workers in understanding their own digital literacy and how to grow in their skills, which in turn will allow them to better serve their clients. Findings from sector research conducted at TIES, discussed above, will allow NorQuest to expand and refine the tool.

## SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH DISSEMINATION

In the nonprofit environment that typifies many settlement service providers, a lack of unrestricted funding and in-house technical support often means that long-term project sustainability post the funded period depends on disseminating the resource to the wider community for adaptation and reuse. In a sector where it can be a challenge to fund ongoing operations and administrative support positions (such as IT), all entities, including colleges and universities, may find it beneficial to open up their catalogue to outside expansion, as collaboration can mean that successful practices are continued.

A recent example can be found in NorQuest's Preparation for Online Learning program, which was originally conceived as an instructor-led class for Canadian Language Benchmarks 4-8 funded by the Government of Alberta. With permission from NorQuest (and funding from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada), the program was adapted and expanded by TIES' e-Learning team and renamed NICO (Newcomer Introduction to Classes Online), creating a new iteration that was student-driven, hosted online, and open to clients with a wider range of English language ability. The adapted NICO materials are offered as an Open Educational Resource (OER), meaning that anyone can apply to take the course directly on TIES' LMS or download the course files for installation on their own LMS.



In this way, projects can be sustained far beyond their initially funded period, and impact many more individuals than initially proposed, increasing the value of the initial seed funding and providing access to programming that might otherwise be out of reach for SPOs and clients alike. We would also like to note, however, that designing tools that will be used sector-wide (or designating them OERs) is best done from the initial planning stages and not as an after-thought, ensuring that the necessary components for usability and availability are factored into development. It often costs less to incorporate these aspects at the beginning, rather than try to add them into a completed project.

## ADDRESSING ONLINE SAFETY

We have talked at length about bringing students online, the significant resources invested in digital literacy training throughout the pandemic, and the evidence that newcomers to Canada are already completing many of their everyday tasks online. With this increase in online service, building awareness of digital disinformation and scams is a need across the sector. With funding from Heritage Canada, NorQuest conducted a community needs assessment to identify common online threats and sources of disinformation, laying the foundation for the WebSafe program, a comprehensive online course providing training to identify and address digital disinformation. Respecting service takeaways from the pandemic, the course is designed to be used in either a fully asynchronous approach or embedded within a blended learning course, allowing instructors to choose the modality that best meets their students' needs (Light and Auers 2021).

Further, in recognition of the diverse learners that would be accessing the tool, a corresponding needs assessment tool can be implemented to identify the components that will be most beneficial for learners. This program was designed from the beginning as an Open Educational Resource (OER), accessible directly through NorQuest's website, or through downloadable SCORM packages that can be uploaded into the user's learning management system. As with the aforementioned NICO program, by designating WebSafe an OER, more SPOs and significantly more newcomers will benefit from the materials than would in a traditional proprietary approach. Through dissemination, the program attains a most elusive goal in the settlement sector: sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

The settlement sector has made significant investments in technology over the last few years, and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated that expansion. We can't stop here, though: as service providers, we should be evaluating our programs,

**“We can't stop here, though: as service providers, we should be evaluating our programs, identifying what works, and building on our research.”**

identifying what works, and building on our research. Perhaps most importantly, we should be embracing collaboration versus competition, identifying where our goals intersect and encouraging one another to carry our work forward. In a sector with so much funding uncertainty, this is the surest investment in our hard work, and a key component in long-term sustainability.

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# DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND DIGITAL NAVIGATION AT ISANS

**ANTHONY CALDWELL** is the Manager of Digital Transformation and Technical Support at Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS). He has worked for 11 years with ISANS and other organizations and groups in the settlement sector in Canada.

**BO NING** is a Digital Navigator at Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS). In this role he has worked to increase digital skills and literacy for both staff and clients.

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Digital transformation is more than the tech or software used to deliver services: it's approaching current models for service delivery in ways enabled by technology. This makes digital transformation a human process as well as a technical one, requiring human support to implement. A settlement sector organization in Nova Scotia, ISANS, is addressing the human element of digital transformation in their support of staff and clients.

Many people say that in 2020 the world changed. In some sense that might be true, but not for digital transformation. For digital transformation, 2020 just picked up the pace for a marathon already underway.

You can find as many definitions for digital transformation as you can find people to ask but for us, in broad strokes, digital transformation is approaching existing issues and processes with the leverage that technology can provide to do more and to do it better. It's not just finding new tools, it's about using those tools to connect more, to reach more people in more places, whether that's a physical space or a social space. It's as much about approach and mindset as it is about the technology itself.

Like many other settlement services providing organizations in Canada, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) has been leveraging technology for operations and delivery of services since 2007, long before it embarked on digital transformation. ISANS had led in the sector in the use of its LMS (Learning Management System), Settlement

**“It's not just finding new tools, it's about using those tools to connect more, to reach more people in more places, whether that's a physical space or a social space.”**

Online, to deliver programs online. Various program teams had used technology in various ways to accomplish specific goals: smartboards, document readers for improved accessibility, and VR to create virtual spaces for participants to explore.

Given all this use of technology, how does digital transformation make a difference? The difference is most of the earlier efforts were tactical. Programs set procedures, set up programs, and turned to technology to fix any gaps found in the course of delivering the service. With digital transformation, technology enters planning at the beginning and becomes an integral part of the overall process, and is not there just to fill a gap. Perhaps technology is there even before the beginning, as experience using technology and seeing its potential opens doors to service delivery that people had not considered before.

Creating a team dedicated to digital transformation and technology support is the logical organizational step to take with that in mind. This team brings technology-oriented teams together under one tent and offers the possibility of finding synergies between tech-oriented teams. It also offers possibilities of greater efficiency, less duplication of effort, and breaking down silos of technology innovation that used to happen in isolation from each other. No longer limited to gap-filling, the digital transformation team works with program teams to find, implement and holistically support program delivery.

If digital transformation is going to affect all parts of the settlement sector and the services it provides, it must support clients of these programs as much as support the staff that deliver them. Every client is different. Clients coming from different educational backgrounds or cultural backgrounds have various levels of digital skills and literacy. A newcomer's English proficiency does not accurately predict digital proficiency. One of the biggest challenges for clients is their limited access to technology. There are clients who are not able to get high-speed internet access due to their financial issues and this reduces their learning opportunities. There are clients who are experiencing physical challenges that hinder their abilities to attend a remote class and be engaged in the virtual learning environment.

**“Clients coming from different educational backgrounds or cultural backgrounds have various levels of digital skills and literacy. A newcomer's English proficiency does not accurately predict digital proficiency.”**

Programs cannot meet their potential if the clients they serve cannot access them. Therefore, our digital transformation team's work extends to facilitating access to technology by both making devices available to clients in need of them and in supporting their use by newcomers coming to Canada with a wide variety of previous experience in using technology.

To address the first issue, our Tech Lending Library has allowed clients in need of devices to access services to do so. Staff ascertain need by their work with their clients, requests the device, and handles distribution and collection. Our Digital Navigators manage the devices themselves and provide support in getting them set up and in their use.

To address the second issue, Digital Navigators work with all clients that need digital support (not just those that are provided devices by the Tech Lending Library). The role of “Digital Navigator” was created as the demand for support increased both for clients to access programs and for staff to deliver them, first with ISANS' Language Services team, then with ISANS' Settlement teams. Today, there are two teams of

Digital Navigators at ISANS: the Language Services Digital Navigators with specialized training in language teaching, and the Settlement Digital Navigators that have training to support clients in settlement and community integration programs.

Digital Navigators offer comprehensive and hands-on support to facilitate language learning in individual and group orientation sessions. They use plain language to give analytical suggestions to staff and to leadership about the uses of the trending technologies in distance learning. All types of support have empowered both clients and instructors who may have been intimidated by technology in the past to both learn and embrace it.

ISANS' Digital Navigators support all types of virtual classrooms, not limited to the live conferencing sessions such as those run traditionally by language instructors or employment program facilitators. The asynchronous learning piece for after-class study and self-directed learning courses also plays a crucial role in remote learning. Amongst the software Digital Navigators have supported both staff and clients on are BigBlueButton, Zoom and now, Microsoft Teams. MS Office is one of the handy tools for Digital Navigators to do illustrations and write and design 'how-to' booklets, procedures and videos. The resources help Digital Navigators deliver information to a wide audience.

There are several challenges faced by instructors and facilitators in program delivery which Digital Navigators are working to address. Instructors have high expectations for measuring progression and program outcomes. Clients use a variety of proprietary software outside of the standard program tools. The validity and reliability of testing in online programs continue to be a challenge. Clients may not perform so well as they do paper testing due to unexpected situations, internet interruption, and the comfortability of using smart devices. Instructors may question the submissions from clients since they sometimes can't “see” the clients. These challenges are obstacles in the clients' learning journey, but they are also opportunities for Digital Navigators to think outside the traditional program delivery box to find solutions that work for both staff and clients.

**“The validity and reliability of testing in online programs continue to be a challenge. Clients may not perform so well as they do paper testing due to unexpected situations, internet interruption, and the comfortability of using smart devices.”**

Support is not limited to in-person meetings or sessions. For remote virtual support, Digital Navigators use phone calls, Zoom, MS Teams, Chrome remote desktop and TeamViewer. During the organizational transition from Zoom to MS

Teams, Digital Navigators used Articulate Storyline to build a simulator that works both for Android and iOS operating systems to ease clients' stress during the transition. Moodle, the open-sourced learning managing system, is ISANS' major platform for continuous learning for its own LMS Settlement Online and for the IRCC-funded LMS for LINC (Language Instruction for New Canadians), called Avenue.ca. Digital Navigators support the staff by providing hands-on professional development sessions both remotely using live conferencing tools, such as the live streaming OBS Studio tool, and in-person. They help curate course pages within the Avenue.ca and Settlement Online learning management systems by following best practices and guidelines for page design and content.

Leading digital transformation by example, Digital Navigators use technology to improve work efficiency. From task handling to email tracking, we have been using Microsoft Excel, Forms and Power to automate and support their daily work. An asynchronous course has also been designed and completed to support clients with stronger English skills, which allows all parties, including Digital Navigators, program admins and LINC instructors to track new clients' progress on essential Moodle skills to get ready for their language classes at ISANS.

From strategic planning through program access and delivery, ISANS' digital transformation and digital navigation teams are helping ISANS' staff and clients use technology to write the next chapters of settlement sector services in Nova Scotia.

# DIGITAL CHAMPIONS FOR THE CANADIAN SETTLEMENT SECTOR: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO DIGITAL INCLUSION AND DIGITAL LITERACY

**LISA ABRAMOWICZ** has extensive experience in the private and public sectors, and currently oversees publications at the Association for Canadian Studies and the Metropolis Institute. She is engaged in a long-term, major diagnostic of the settlement and immigration sector in Canada, *Envisioning the Future of the Immigrant Serving Sector*.

**SARAH KOOI** is an experienced project manager and senior manager at the Association for Canadian Studies and the Metropolis Institute. She is also the team lead on the *Envisioning the Future of the Immigrant Serving Sector* project that is being supported by the *World Education Services Mariam Assefa Fund*.

**ERIKA LAMBERT** holds a Joint Honours B.A. in Communications and Sociology from the University of Ottawa, followed by an M.A. in Public Policy and Administration from Adler University, Vancouver. Erika's research centers on Canadian public policy touching on immigration and social justice issues.

**IRENE MACKINTOSH** is co-founder and managing director of Mhor Collective. Having worked in social justice for her entire working life, and for over ten years specifically in digital inclusion, Irene has direct experience of how, collectively, we can make a difference and effect change together. Over the last few years, Irene has worked extensively on digital inclusion projects for refugees and asylum seekers, people experiencing homelessness, and people currently using drugs. She's currently also focussed on how technology enabled healthcare impacts on people who don't have the digital skills they need. Irene also enjoys a good beach, a strong coffee, and Dr Who.

**SHONA MUNRO** is co-founder and managing director of Mhor Collective. Shona's career started in community youth work, leading to community arts and culture and eventually into further education. For the past decade Shona has channelled the community and collaborative approaches into digital inclusion work. Shona has extensive experience and knowledge of community education and how to address the needs of local populations and diverse demographics. She has worked successfully with local government, care providers, adult education and health support networks to design and deliver digital inclusion projects. Shona loves the outdoors and can often be found rambling through the Scottish Highland landscapes.

**MATT SPURWAY** is the founder and Executive Director of the nascent digital inclusion organization, GEO Nova Scotia (Getting Everyone Online). Bringing different perspectives and experiences together to tackle complex social challenges is Matt's passion, with community-centred Collective Impact experience in areas such as Affordable Housing, Education, Access to Healthcare, and Food Security. Matt loves leading a diverse and talented team that is growing GEO Nova Scotia into a major force for digital inclusion across the province, and the fact that he can work with people across the country and around the world without leaving his home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

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When the COVID-19 pandemic forced SPOs to move towards virtual and hybrid service delivery models, settlement organizations and newcomers alike struggled to overcome the challenges relating to digital equity, digital access and digital literacy. As part of the two-year, national research project funded by the WES Mariam Assefa Fund entitled "Envisioning the Future of the Immigrant-Serving Sector," ACS-Metropolis Institute, the Mhor Collective Scotland, and GEO Nova Scotia partnered together to pilot and tailor the delivery of the Digital Champions program for the Canadian settlement sector, a holistic "train the trainer" approach to delivering peer to peer support for newcomers to advance digital literacy.

For many years now, research, and frontline work, has evidenced [the positive impact that trusted intermediaries can make](#) in supporting people with digital skills. Within a Scottish context, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and [Mhor Collective](#) have worked with colleagues across the non-profit sector to implement digital champion approaches as part of grassroots work to address social inequality. This approach is supported by the Government, and in particular by the [national strategy](#) which also includes a commitment to digital inclusion. Prior to 2020, work had been delivered on the ground, working closely with non-profit organisations to offer training and skills support, a collective approach which established cross-sector partnerships, building a network across Scotland.

As the pandemic began to take hold, organisations across Scotland were quick to mobilise after an initial call to action from SCVO and Scottish Government. Recognising the vital role that digital participation would play as core services moved online, Connecting Scotland was formed, as one of the largest digital inclusion projects in Europe. With immediate investment from the Scottish Government, over 36,000 new Chromebooks and iPads with unlimited data were distributed, directly to people facing digital exclusion.

Devices and data mean that people have physical, unrestricted access to the internet, but this does not mean that people will have the skills or understanding to make the most of this opportunity. To unlock this potential, and to help people meaningfully participate online, Mhor Collective (see below) trained over 3000 digital champions in the essentials of helping people overcome barriers to engaging with the internet, which can be complex and varied: 93% of those participating in training felt adequately equipped to take on the DC role asked of them.

These digital champions were then able to provide 1:1 support for people, mostly (though not exclusively) at distance during a time of unprecedented social upheaval. An incredible 99% of people who engaged with their digital digital champion said the support was exactly what they needed and that it enabled them to use digital tools to reach out to loved ones; access core services; engage with public health and much more.

**“Learning that I could be a Digital Champion using my soft skills, I don’t need to be an expert to help people.”**

*- Digital Champions training, participant feedback*

## **PARTNERSHIP AND CANADIAN DELIVERY OF DIGITAL CHAMPIONS**

Since January 2021, the ACS-Metropolis Institute has been working on a national research project funded by the WES Mariam Assefa Fund entitled “Envisioning the Future of the Immigrant-Serving Sector”. The project aims to uncover

barriers and opportunities that the settlement sector is facing when it comes to innovation, equity and capacity building and test new solutions to strengthen the sector to benefit the economic integration of newcomers to Canada.

Our research from both primary and secondary data pointed to the fact that digital inclusion is increasingly being recognized as a [“super social determinant of health”](#). At the same time, there is a growing [digital divide](#) within the newcomer populations of Canada, since new immigrants may experience higher rates of poverty, precarious housing, and lower educational and employment levels as compared to the general population. Lower income [Canadians experience digital inequity at a higher rate](#) which perpetuates these pre-existing inequities. Some newcomers are especially vulnerable with lower levels of digital literacy, such as refugees who have [experienced trauma, women, elderly, and/or disabled](#). A lack of digital literacy also makes newcomers more susceptible to scams and fraud, increased isolation, and inhibits full participation in society. Our [September 2021 focus group](#) with settlement practitioners also found that the sector wanted more instruction and capacity on how to provide digital literacy training for newcomers. Service providers also acknowledged that many of their vulnerable clients, such as refugees, lacked digital literacy and access.

In Spring 2022, the Association for Canadian Studies-Metropolis Institute partnered with GEO Nova Scotia and the Mhor Collective to tailor, pilot and deliver the Digital Champions for Newcomers program for Canadian Settlement practitioners. The Digital Champions pilot aimed to support newcomers in acquiring digital skills by training “Digital Champions” from immigrant serving organizations across Canada using direct 1:1 digital literacy support offered virtually. The pilot’s purpose was to increase the digital literacy skills and confidence of newcomers to promote participation in the digital economy while building the capacity of immigrant service provider organizations (SPOs) by training staff and volunteers as Digital Champions to support clients in acquiring or improving digital skills.

Over the summer of 2022, the project team worked together with representatives from the Canadian Settlement sector to co-design and co-develop training resources for the Canadian Settlement context, including the creation of a standardized digital skills assessment, curated resources such as a trainer handbook, evaluation tools, and other learning materials. Between September and November 2023, the project team held nine virtual Digital Champions training sessions. Topics that were addressed during the training session included : Device Familiarization, Connecting to the internet, Online Safety and Security, Communicating with Family and Friends, Safe and Reliable Online Sources, Accessing Public Services, Online security and privacy, Online Job and Education Searches, using applications such as translation programs, and more.

The response from the sector was overwhelmingly positive, and the limited number of seats for the virtual training sessions quickly reached capacity within days of opening registration. Overall, 170 participants from approximately a number of 40 organizations across Canada attended the training, demonstrating significant interest from the sector for this kind of support.

**“I get how important digital literacy is and its benefit.”**

*- Digital Champions training, participant feedback*

To evaluate the Digital Champions training program, a series of qualitative research tools were employed to gather feedback and insight into newcomers' initial digital skills, the improvement of settlement providers' ability to deliver digital skills training, and lastly how the training supported our mission of increasing digital inclusion and equity for newcomers.

The evaluation results of the initial Nova Scotia Digital Champions as well as the Canada-wide Digital Champions pilot were overwhelmingly positive, with few suggestions for improvement. Participants noted that they found the experience to be constructive—including the resources provided, conversation between attendees, learning about the adverse digital learning needs of certain groups of newcomers, and lastly, tips on cybersecurity. 88.9% of respondents answered that they would apply items they learned during the training sessions to their work. Suggestions for future sessions included more practical examples and specific training for differing aspects of digital literacy.

The second survey, circulated to all participants Canada-wide, sought to uncover further insights into the utilization of the training and barriers noted. While the majority of respondents (72.73%) reported that the newcomers they worked with did not complete the digital skills assessment yet, 81.2% said they do plan to use the digital skills assessment in the future. Digital Champion trainees noted that they had increased their knowledge in helping newcomers, gained new knowledge and technical skills, improved their own digital confidence, and made use of the resources shared during the session. 90.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Digital Champions training enhanced their ability to support newcomers in building their digital skills.

## CONCLUSION

Digital Champions help others to build confidence and skills to get online. Digital Champions do not need to be digital experts, they simply need to be confident in their own digital skills and willing to try new things. The Digital Champion model is designed to make the most of trusted relationships

already in place. [Research](#) indicates people new to the internet have a more positive experience and gain online independence more successfully if supported by someone they trust.

Digital Champions can be anyone, both paid staff or volunteers. When embedding a DC model in an organisation, DCs work best in frontline positions where they have regular contact and trusted relationships with service users. Embedding Digital Champions in an organisation not only provides support for service users, it helps build digital confidence among the staff. Often staff digital skills and confidence is lower than anticipated, and providing Digital Champion support can have a positive impact, building a more confident, dynamic workforce over the longer term.

**“We finally get digital literacy training catering specifically for new immigrants.”**

*- Digital Champions training, participant feedback*

## NEXT STEPS

ACS-Metropolis, in partnership with GEO NS, S.U.C.C.E.S.S., the Arab Community Centre of Toronto, and the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society have submitted a joint project proposal to expand the delivery of the Digital Champions program to newcomers through Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada's Digital Literacy Exchange program. This project would expand the reach and scope of Digital Champion training opportunities across the country with in-person and virtual training opportunities being offered from service providing project partners in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia in a variety of non-official languages. These training opportunities would also deliver support for more complex digital skills, expanding on the “core competencies” that was delivered in the Canadian Digital Champions pilot. A funding decision is expected to be made in early 2023. In the meantime, interested organizations can access a Digital Champions Implementation toolkit at [www.acs-metropolis.ca](http://www.acs-metropolis.ca) which contains a quick-start guide on how to implement a Digital Champion program at your own organization.



## MORE ABOUT OUR PARTNERS:

### MHOR COLLECTIVE

[Mhor Collective](#) is a non profit organisation established in 2016. Recognising that digital is a fundamental necessity, underpinning every aspect of civic society, the organisation also recognises that the internet can also compound inequalities, and make things much worse for people without digital access or digital understanding. While tackling wider social justice issues, organisations need to ensure that digital inclusion work is part of their core activity as it can offer opportunities for empowerment, participation and social inclusion, impacting positively on social connection, finances, education, employment, health and wellbeing and wider civic engagement.

The team is based in the Scottish Highlands, but works across the UK (and now across the world!) supporting organisations to implement digital inclusion work as part of frontline services. Mhor takes a collaborative approach working closely with national and local government bodies; public health; social housing and, vitally, the nonprofit sector.

Mhor works with organisations in a number of ways:

- **Research:** Through implementing co-design, and by seeking to engage lived expertise, Mhor seeks first to understand the people supported by organisations and the challenges faced. This is also informed by the latest academic research and Mhor's own experience in this space.
- **Develop:** This period of shared research allows for the development of a valuable, focussed approach, which meets the genuine needs of people impacted by social inequality (and therefore, digital inequality).
- **Deliver:** Mhor then delivers informed, participatory workshops and training for senior and middle management, and (vitally!) to potential digital champions.
- **Learn and Share:** Mhor also develops and delivers evaluation pathways to share stories of impact, based also on the insights gained through co-design.

Mhor specialises in working with organisations who are supporting those most impacted by social inequality and has a wealth of experience in creating tailored programmes for organisations working with particular demographics including [refugees and asylum seekers](#);<sup>11</sup> older adults; children and young people; [people experiencing homelessness](#); people currently using drugs; people who have experienced the justice

system; [people affected by poverty](#), or who are long term unemployed.

Mhor also works with care homes, with housing associations and across public health and local government co-designing and delivering impactful programmes of change.

From a Mhor Collective perspective, the organisation remains committed to challenging the negative impact of the internet on those in Canada who already face social inequality, and seeks to actively work alongside organisations and colleagues 'across the pond' to share and learn together, coming together to ensure that tackling digital inequality is part of everyone's collective endeavour. There is awareness of the incredible positive difference that the internet can make to peoples' lives, how it can unlock potential, open opportunities, empower people in all the best ways to make their own choices and help themselves.

### GEO NOVA SCOTIA

GEO Nova Scotia began as "the GEO Project", a local grassroots initiative in March 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in response to the extreme isolation and disconnect experienced by lower-income individuals and families who could not afford home internet access or a home computer. GEO stands for Getting Everyone Online.

Using a [Collective Impact](#) approach (which they refer to as "Stone Soup") GEO began by bringing together public, private, and non-profit partners to provide free home internet and computers through a network of local non-profits they called Referral Partners. The program has been growing ever since, from a start-up budget of \$15,000 in 2020 to an annual budget of more than \$1.6-million in 2022-23, connecting hundreds of homes and distributing over a thousand computers.

Since its inception, GEO has recognized that Digital Inclusion is more than just internet access and devices. People also need the skills to use the internet safely and with confidence. That is why GEO is also proud to have launched Canada's first fully-funded Digital Champions program in November 2022, with the help of the Mhor Collective. Beyond core training, GEO Digital Champions offers the newcomer training module co-developed with ACS-Metropolis, and a youth-specific module, with plans for additional modules in 2023.



# CREATING A PRE-ARRIVAL PROGRAM THAT WORKS FOR NEWCOMERS!

**NICK NOORANI** is a well-known immigrant thought leader who has been working on several entrepreneurial ventures like the Canadian Immigrant Magazine, the Top 25 Canadian Immigrant Awards, Prepare for Canada, the largest private digital pre-arrival program, and Immigrant Networks. Nick is also a best-selling author and award-winning journalist who has co-authored *Welcome to Canada*, the official government of Canada handbook for newcomers. He has also been closely involved in policy and was appointed Chair for a panel on immigrant Employment Challenges by the Minister of ESDC.

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Pre-arrival settlement services were funded by the Federal Government in 2005. It took them a while to shift to digital service delivery. Now that is the norm. This report looks at the published data on outcomes and provides recommendations to the sector.

## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY OF PRE-ARRIVAL PROGRAMS

You have to be an immigrant to understand the importance of pre-arrival services and how they can potentially fulfill a critical information need for the large numbers of immigrants moving to Canada at different steps in their journey. Immigrants don't migrate for a year, two, or ten, they leave the known for the unknown on this journey, and their information needs will change over the years.

Starting in 2005, under the Canadian International Innovation Program (CIIP) banner operating through the Association of Canadian Community College (ACCC), pre-arrival programs were offered through in-person services in China, India, and the Philippines. Initially, as the services were in-person, candidates were expected to travel to the 'head office' to attend a class for a whole day. Over time, as numbers were low, there were some video call-based interactions.

## IRCC - 2018 REPORT ON PRE-ARRIVAL PROGRAMS<sup>1</sup>

A September 12, 2018, report by IRCC's Research & Evaluation Branch showed some interesting statistics:

- In 2017, 23 service providers were funded by IRCC.
- Half (50%) of the non-refugee clients received services in person only. 34% received services online only, and 16% received services both in-person and online.
- The majority (71%) of eligible newcomers surveyed were unaware of pre-arrival services.
- The overall cost per client to provide pre-arrival services was \$1,910; however, costs per client varied significantly by SPO (i.e. from \$48 and \$27,779).

- The recommendations included:
  - Developing a strategic direction for program delivery.
  - Considering the cost of services and value for money.
  - Developing and implementing a pre-arrival services promotion strategy to significantly increase awareness and uptake.

## "PREPARE FOR CANADA"

In 2011, with the financial support of Scotiabank, I designed the first private sector pre-arrival program called "Prepare for Canada."

Here's what was different:

1. It was 100% digital – there were no in-person programs as they were cost-inefficient and difficult to scale.
2. Designed by a skilled immigrant, lived experience helped create solutions to immigrant pain points.
3. It focused exclusively on the primary visa holder. (Spouses were included.)
4. The program has had over 1.2 Million subscribers since 2010.

We had no funding from IRCC or any other body, and our program was mainly funded by corporate Canada through advertising and sponsorship. Later, a significant part of our business helped IRCC-funded, visa-ready clients with outreach. Costs were covered by the commercial body, and there were, on average, six webinars every month speaking to hundreds of thousands of immigrants in that decade alone. We were ineligible for funding because we were a for-profit organization and because we worked with banks, cell phone companies, etc. I consider this to have been an opportunity lost.

**“It is essential to understand the importance of authentic newcomer experiences and build communication around this.”**

Key learnings include the idea that programs and processes for pre-arrival programs created by non-immigrants, bluntly, are not going to help. It is essential to understand the importance of authentic newcomer experiences and build communication around this. It is also important to ensure

that identification with the target audience is deeper than the idea that it is 'any immigrant speaking to any immigrant'. Country-specific support and communications are increasingly important.

## THE NEW CANADIAN NEWCOMER

The new 2013 points system changed the demographic of the newcomer audience dramatically: they had a higher level of English proficiency (CLB 8 most likely); they were significantly younger than previous cohorts (between 28 to 35 years old); they were from the generation of cell phones and Google, and sought answers to their questions themselves; they were natural networkers and used social media to get answers.

The new newcomer is mobile-first—physically, mentally, and in the way that he/she picks and consumes content and advice. They move quickly from one city to another and if something doesn't work, they change occupations based on demand, and they reach out and ask for help! From the moment they get their confirmation of permanent residence (COPR), they are in another world—from planning Uber pickups from the airport to temporary stays at hotels while they check out the housing alternatives they have narrowed down overseas, with deposits ready. Some have set up meetings to open up their bank account to address their financial needs. Did they stop to get a Canadian cell phone? No, they did that before landing, securing a QR code with a Canadian provider!

Just as the new newcomer's behaviour is different from previous cohorts, so is their media preference. A survey conducted by the CBC's Media Technology Monitor<sup>2</sup> shows interesting statistics:

- **Newcomers are 37% less likely to subscribe to cable or satellite.** They get their entertainment and information elsewhere (For streaming, they use Netflix and Disney. For access in different languages, they use Hotstar, iQiyi, and Shahid).
- **Newcomers are less likely to live in device-heavy households.** They have fewer laptops and TV sets.
- **Newcomer cell phone usage is higher than amongst Canadian-born individuals.** Cell Phone ownership among newcomers is virtually ubiquitous. iPhones are the most popular brand. Six in ten newcomers with a cellphone have one, compared to 5 in 10 Canadian-born respondents.
- **Newcomers have one cell phone, with two providers.** Many newcomers use their cellphone from their country of origin as it is cheaper than Canadian rates!

- **Newcomer WhatsApp usage is three times that of the Canadian average** for messaging, video calls, and voice calls.
- Facebook is still #1 for Newcomers.
- **Newcomers pay for YouTube Premium.** I love this one! Most Canadians do not know that YouTube has a Premium channel! It has no ads! Newcomers are more than three times as likely to be subscribing to YouTube Premium than Canadian-born respondents. **81% watched YouTube in the past month!**
- Newcomers are less likely to be stacking SVODs (subscription video-on-demand). 56% of newcomers have two or more SVODs compared to 62% of Canadian-born respondents.
- Their news is not on Cable—it is on social media—this is double the usage of Canadians!

## SCAMMERS AND MANIPULATORS TARGETING UNREGULATED PRE-ARRIVAL MEDIA

Nature abhors a vacuum and with limited digital information available to the newcomer audience, it was only a matter of time before they created their own solution.

Unfortunately, the solution came with some concerning consequences, attracting manipulators and clickbait artists. These so-called YouTube and Instagram ‘experts’ use shock tactics to entertain and seemingly educate their audience, while coolly collecting checks from YouTube for increased views. No statement is too bizarre, or too far-fetched.

Someone sitting halfway across Canada may not question these fraudulent claims, assuming that Youtubers are all honest and have their best intentions at heart. There are also so-called professional experts, who charge exorbitant fees for services, such as resume-building, and newcomers may be unaware that they can access these services for free as part of the federal government’s mandate. Services such as resume-building should be part of the digitization of services by IRCC. This is, in my opinion, long-needed.

## SECTORAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Pre-arrival services should be re-imagined. The system seems to have been hijacked by individuals on YouTube, Instagram, and other platforms, selling questionable services. It will

require a concerted effort to create an alternative system that works for newcomers. We have a moral responsibility to do so.

**“It is critical to have a more in-depth understanding of newcomer habits in their journey to Canada.”**

Providing pre-arrival information is not linear, and must follow pathways set by users. It therefore needs to contain authentic information, come from genuine partners, and be community-based. It is critical to have a more in-depth understanding of newcomer habits in their journey to Canada. We must keep talking to them to understand and create services for them.

There is a huge opportunity for Governmental bodies, immigrant-serving organizations, and allies to band together in creating informational community circles. (However, the worst thing that could happen is that these are ‘owned’ by the Government.) Ideally, these community circles would be integrated with local immigration partnerships and immigrant-serving organizations so that the journey may be seamless.

## REFERENCES

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