



Opinion

Canada needs post-pandemic digital, data strategy

For Canada to compete in this new digital environment, our country needs to take seriously the consequences of COVID-19 on information technology, intellectual property, personal privacy, and international internet transactions.

BY KEITH JANSA & ALEX BENAY

COVID-19 has exposed many areas in which Canada was unprepared for the future, including in its digital enablement. A pandemic that has forced millions of Canadians inside and online has revealed the high cost of accepting a national economic ecosystem that neither promotes nor protects domestic innovation and information technology.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the daily lives of Canadians, it was obvious our country was lagging well behind other G20 nations in the area of digital enablement. To bridge that gap, the CIO Strategy Council had begun work on a modern national blueprint based on four thematic pillars, which support the twin goals of building digital capacity and digital resilience.

The first pillar is the adoption and acceptance of trusted digital identities, both within and between organizations, to allow Canadians to securely access online digital services. COVID-19 has forced Canadians to conduct their personal and professional business across



Over the past 20 weeks, Canada has been speedily and, even, involuntarily shifting from a knowledge-driven economy to a knowledge-dominated economy with information technology being our exclusive conduit to our communities. *Photograph courtesy of Unsplash*

various digital platforms requiring a patchwork of passworded accounts so inefficient they are almost ineffective.

The second pillar is the establishment of secure data-sharing mechanisms between different organizations across all sectors of the Canadian economy. The secure sharing of data is essential to meaningful collaboration and innovation, both in the fight against COVID-19, but also in the development of new economic opportunities and in the delivery of social benefits.

The third pillar speaks to how we both acquire and develop the digital tools, technologies, and talent Canada needs in these unprecedented and unpredictable times. We must significantly improve our domestic procurement activities and talent acquisition through a strong integrated ecosystem, with a specific focus on maximizing the economic benefits to Canada while promoting the emergence of innovative Canadian enterprises.

The fourth pillar is to defend our digital infrastructure, including our data networks and digital assets, through the adoption of cybersecure devices and systems. Because the COVID-19 pandemic has made us more dependent on digital tools, it has also made us more vulnerable to digital threats. Protecting our data has never been more important or more empowering.

Within each of these pillars are a myriad of actionable measures we can take to reassert Canada's technological sovereignty. These are practical and strategic norms that the CIO Strategy Council is active in codifying to create a digitally stronger Canada.

There is a clear distinction to be drawn between protection and protectionism. This is not about isolating Canada from global trade; it is about helping to insulate us from global threats and positioning the country to be strong in the global economy.

Over the past 20 years, Canada has been steadily evolving

from a production-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. But, over the past 20 weeks, Canada has been speedily and, even, involuntarily shifting from a knowledge-driven economy to a knowledge-dominated economy with information technology being our exclusive conduit to our communities.

It is difficult to predict or project which of the pandemic trends we've adopted will have a lasting impact on our society and which will be forgotten once a vaccine is discovered. But there are already clear signs that the world's largest technology companies are acting as though we have experienced an epochal event that will forever transform the global economy.

For Canada to compete in this new digital environment, our country needs to take seriously the consequences of COVID-19 on information technology, intellectual property, personal privacy, and international internet transactions. These are not new challenges—only old challenges which have taken on new urgency. Founded on a mission to bring together Canada's most forward-thinking chief information officers, the Strategy Council cuts across major sectors of the Canadian economy, both public and private, to drive strategic leadership and collective action to result in a safer, more prosperous, and digital-first country. This mission has never been more urgent than it is today when our digital capabilities are now more than ever, mission critical. Canada is blessed with tons of highly skilled talent, including some of the leading minds in the area of digital innovation. The fundamentals are sound; we need a modern framework to enable them.

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