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.

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.

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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.

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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

I'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.