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.

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 Mohr 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 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;[11] 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 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.