



CANADA'S CENTRE  
FOR DIGITAL AND  
MEDIA LITERACY

LE CENTRE CANADIEN  
D'ÉDUCATION AUX MÉDIAS ET  
DE LITTÉRATIE NUMÉRIQUE

## BUILDING DIGITAL CAPACITY: Capitalizing on Digital Literacy Skills

Federal Pre-budget Submission 2018

MEDIASMARTS

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## **About MediaSmarts**

MediaSmarts is a national, bilingual, not-for-profit centre for digital and media literacy. For the past 25 years MediaSmarts has advanced digital and media literacy in Canadian schools, homes and communities, developed and delivered high-quality Canadian-based digital and media literacy programs and resources, and conducted and disseminated research that contributes to the development of informed public policy on issues related to media.

Through our work, we support families with information and tools so they can help children and youth develop the critical thinking and digital literacy skills they need to benefit from the digital economy and society, and derive new opportunities for employment, citizenship, innovation, creative expression and social inclusion.

## **Executive Summary**

Digital literacy and digital skills are essential for improving Canadian productivity and competitiveness. Future jobs will rely on the ability to continuously learn and solve problems using a wide array of digital skills. The rapid rise of technological advancements in robotics and artificial intelligence is changing the workplace and increasing the demand for high-skilled workers. Yet research shows many Canadians do not have the levels of literacy, numeracy and digital problem-solving skills they need to compete in today's economy.

A long-term strategy to improve digital literacy skills for Canadians of various socio-economic backgrounds will help boost productivity and competitiveness for the next generation. Investing in these skills through federal programs makes sound economic and social sense, and will ensure Canadians thrive in an evolving and more digitized workplace and society. This holistic, long-term outlook will in turn help spur innovation in new products and services right here at home and help Canadian-based companies and workers gain a competitive edge globally.

MediaSmarts has three recommendations for the 2018-19 federal budget:

- 1) That the federal government works with MediaSmarts to create a national digital literacy taskforce to develop a strategy for federal support of digital literacy for all Canadians for the next decade.
- 2) That the federal government supports the efforts of not-for-profits working in this area by dedicating long-term funding to organizations such as MediaSmarts – Canada's only national centre for digital literacy.
- 3) That the federal government supports research into digital literacy skills in vulnerable communities and continues to be mindful of how these communities are engaging with and being engaged by technology.

## Getting More out of the Digital Revolution

Technology is changing the way companies do business. Digital literacy, by extension, is an essential factor required to drive productivity growth and expand Canada's gross domestic product.

Greater digital technology adoption can yield tremendous economic gains for Canada: a 1% increase in labour productivity resulting from the adoption of digital technology yields an additional \$8 billion in value to the Canadian economy. Corporate activities such as real-time data manipulation, client communication and advertising on social media all require digital skills.

Unfortunately, Canadian small businesses are not adopting digital practices fast enough. A recent study by PayPal revealed that while four out of five Canadians shop online, less than one in five (17%) Canadian small and medium-sized businesses are using online payment tools such as electronic invoicing, online marketplaces or ecommerce-enabled websites.<sup>1</sup>

Digital technologies are also changing the behaviour of families – from how kids submit their homework to how parents submit their taxes. For instance, Canada Revenue Agency's "auto-fill" service is used by more 5.7 million individuals to assist Canadians with filing their taxes. But to use "auto-fill" in a productive way, you need to be confident in your digital abilities.

In order to leverage these technologies and fuel adoption, Canadian families need to continuously sharpen their digital skill sets. To equip Canadians with the digital skills required for the next decade, the federal government needs to support a multi-generational, holistic approach that will widen the ability of Canadian families to access and benefit from the opportunities digital technologies provide.

The federal government can help Canadian families to identify and take advantage of the best possible digital platforms for their respective needs and circumstances. In addition to the investments of Budget 2017, the federal government should create a national digital literacy taskforce to ensure that these must-have skills for the digital workplace and society are being constantly cultivated to improve productivity and fuel innovation. A national taskforce will deliver a strategy that will guide investments in programs and skills across Canada for the next generation.

In cooperation with the federal government, the taskforce could work to identify the existing gaps in knowledge throughout the country and help guide the pathway for Canada to succeed in the digital economy for decades to come. MediaSmarts is well equipped to chair this taskforce because of its experience in conducting national research on Canadians' digital literacy skills, developing policies, creating public awareness campaigns and online resources, and developing learning programs for K-12 classrooms in areas where Canadian students have

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<sup>1</sup> PayPal Canada. Canadian SMB Landscape Study. 2017. <https://www.paypal.com/stories/ca/less-than-one-in-five-canadian-smbs-accepts-online-payments>

substantial knowledge gaps.

**Recommendation:**

- That the federal government **create a national digital literacy taskforce** comprised of key stakeholders at all levels of government (both federal and provincial/territorial), as well as those representing civil society, the private sector, educational institutions and communities across Canada, to develop a national strategy.
- That the Government of Canada **asks MediaSmarts to chair** the national digital literacy task force.

**Dedicated and Stable Funding**

In 2001, the Canadian government created a comprehensive digital strategy to promote safe, wise and responsible internet use. The strategy was developed and implemented by Industry Canada in partnership with the departments of Justice, Solicitor General and Canadian Heritage, along with the Canadian Association of Internet Providers.

Education and awareness were cornerstones of the strategy, with MediaSmarts (known then as Media Awareness Network) as the key partner providing research and digital literacy education in the K-12 arena. Programs such as SchoolNet and LibraryNet positioned Canada as a global leader for connectivity and educational online content at the time.

While digital media and technologies have evolved tremendously since 2001, the importance the federal government placed on digital literacy has declined. This lack of stewardship is partly due to government cuts during the past decade, as well as a different approach to skills development by the federal government.

Since 2015, the federal government has launched an ambitious effort to make Canada a world-leading centre for innovation, to help create good, well-paying jobs, and to help strengthen and develop new skills. Budget 2017 dedicated \$29.5 million over the next five years to the new Digital Literacy Exchange program. Sustainable funding for the digital literacy sector for the next decade will allow MediaSmarts to expand and amplify its programs that address topics linked to the Government of Canada's Innovation and Skills Plan.

They include:

- 1) **Innovation:** We focus on the media and technologies that are shaping the innovation landscape now and in the future. We also educate youth and their families about the skills and competencies that are needed to be comfortable users and competent leaders in the technological space.

- 2) **Engaged Citizenship:** We equip young people to be ethical and informed participants in the digital world by providing them with the tools they need to understand their privacy rights, the do's and don'ts of engagement that foster healthy and constructive exchanges, how to validate online information, and how to be smart media consumers.
- 3) **Inclusion:** We pay particular attention to the forces that may exclude or marginalize some people or groups and provide specialized programs to help young people, educators and families combat these. These include supporting safe and empowering online environments for women and girls, helping immigrant parents to understand and adapt to Canadian online cultures and experiences with their kids, and addressing online bullying and hate.
- 4) **Safety/Security:** We conduct national research and develop evidence-informed responses to support safe, secure and ethical use of digital devices. These include tools to help ensure that young people are getting consistent, age-appropriate and relevant messages on how to use digital technologies safely and securely.
- 5) **Adoption/Confidence:** We build trust, confidence and competence in Internet users, as these are necessary preconditions to developing the skills to benefit from e-commerce, digital media, government online services and other aspects of the digital economy.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

- That the federal government continues to support the efforts of not-for-profits working in this area by **dedicating long-term funding** to organizations such as MediaSmarts – Canada's only national centre for digital literacy.
- That the federal government commits to fund MediaSmarts.
- That the Government of Canada continues to **promote the importance of digital literacy** and encourages Canadian businesses to support not-for-profits who are working in the digital literacy sector.

### **Empowering Vulnerable Communities**

As the Government of Canada continues to create policies around digital literacy skills, it must take care to monitor how the digital revolution is impacting vulnerable communities to ensure that technology is an enabler – not a barrier – to active participation in the economy.

Findings from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) show that recent and established immigrants scored significantly lower in “using digital technology, communication tools and networks to acquire and evaluate information, communicate with others and perform practical tasks” than those who are Canadian-born.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> PIAAC (2013). PIAAC in Canada. [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/skills-matter\\_9789264258051-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/skills-matter_9789264258051-en)

Adults with lower digital literacy skill levels – and as a result, lower confidence – are less likely to use the Internet and are more fearful about security online. They are also less likely to use the technology for participating in the digital economy through activities such as banking, research, shopping, job-hunting, education and accessing government services.<sup>3</sup>

In families where parents have lower digital literacy skills, children’s opportunities are also diminished. Parents’ behaviours and attitudes towards technology directly impact their children’s experiences and approaches towards media, making it difficult for parents with narrowed views and experiences to empower and guide their children in maximizing the benefits and minimizing the risks associated with digital technologies.

As stated in Budget 2017, women and girls are more likely than men to experience poverty, violence and harassment. This aligns with MediaSmarts’ quantitative study that found girls are significantly more likely than boys to feel that the Internet is an unsafe space for them and to fear they could be hurt if they talk to someone they don’t know online. More girls than boys also feel their parents are worried that they can get hurt online.<sup>4</sup>

Research from the UK suggests that more restrictive approaches based on an online safety model produce students who are less able to keep themselves safe online and are generally less confident and capable users of digital technology.<sup>5</sup> Digital literacy skills can empower girls with the awareness, attitude and ability to appropriately understand and use digital tools and platforms effectively and to their maximum benefit.

### Recommendation 3:

- That the federal government **supports research into digital literacy skills in vulnerable communities** and continues to be mindful of how these communities are engaging with and being engaged by technology.

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<sup>3</sup> Colledge, M., Haight, M. “The risk of building infrastructure without building digital literacy.” *The Globe and Mail*. September 26, 2016. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-commentary/the-risk-of-building-infrastructure-without-building-digital-literacy/article32043633/>

<sup>4</sup> Steeves, Valerie. (2014) *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Life Online*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

[http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/pdfs/publication-report/full/YCWWIII\\_Life\\_Online\\_FullReport\\_2.pdf](http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/pdfs/publication-report/full/YCWWIII_Life_Online_FullReport_2.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Hollingworth, S., Mansaray, K., Rose, A. (2011). “Parents’ perspectives on technology and children’s learning in the home: social class and the role of the habitus.” *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 27, 347-360. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2011.00431.x/abstract>