

Executive Summary

Report by the Information and Communications Technology Committee

1. Background

This report describes the work of the Information and Communications Technology Committee of the Agency of the Future project. Agency of the Future is a national project started in 2013 by Canada's settlement sector and the Pathways to Prosperity research partnership (P2P). Its goal is to help settlement organizations capitalize on the market opportunities resulting from recent (and upcoming) policy changes and new information and communications technology (ICT). CIC has participated in Agency of the Future because of the Department's interest in strengthening the settlement delivery system.

Agency of the Future aims to do three things: (1) to help the settlement sector identify strategic business opportunities involving new markets, new clients and new technologies; (2) to identify promising practices that would allow the strategic business opportunities to be exploited; and (3) to establish mechanisms for disseminating information about the promising practices to settlement agencies across the country. The integration of these three processes into a coordinated and recurrent cycle would power innovation within the national settlement sector.

Information and communications technology plays a dual role in Agency of the Future: On the one hand, it opens the door to new business opportunities in new locations; on the other hand, it makes possible new forms of agency training and knowledge dissemination.

This report is meant to serve as a small mirror of current ICT practices within the settlement sector. The goal is to foster a conversation within the sector about the work that each region is doing with ICTs and, more importantly, about the ways in which the sector can control its future development.

2. Process

The ICT Committee was formed by Agency of the Future to examine the role of technology. It was staffed entirely by volunteers from the settlement sector and the P2P research initiative.

To operationalize its mandate, the Committee posed four questions:

- What are current settlement agency practices and initiatives that use ICTs?
- What demands and roles are these practices and initiatives fulfilling?
- What are possible future uses of ICTs by settlement service organizations?
- What issues and challenges does the sector face in using ICTs?

To answer these questions, the Committee met seven times in ten months. As well, a group wikispace was created for sharing ideas and stories. The themes that emerged from this exchange were organized into categories to create a typology of ICT use. Committee members also agreed to provide two in-depth case studies of ICT use.

The Committee agreed that, in a second stage, a broad survey should be conducted of ICT use by the settlement sector. The Committee felt that the survey should also examine sector expectations and plans for ICT use, challenges to ICT expansion, capacity constraints within the sector, and perceptions of client preferences related to ICTs.

3. Results and Analysis

The data collected revealed extensive use of ICTs by service providers. Agencies are using social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), mobile phone functions (e.g. texting and apps), blogs, videoconferencing and webinar tools (e.g. WebEx, Collaborate), Learning Management Systems (e.g. Desire to Learn, Canvas), file sharing programs (e.g. Dropbox, Google Drive), videosharing (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo), group collaboration (e.g. Google Docs) and data management tools (e.g. cloud computing, Correlate)

More important than the tools are the functions that the ICTs are being used for. The report identified four broad categories of current ICT use and investment:

1. Service delivery, particularly training services, to newcomer clients and settlement agency staff.
2. Partnership development and the provision of services and expertise to other institutions.
3. Communication aimed at building relationships with newcomers, community stakeholders and service delivery partners; as well communication within the agency and sector, and advocacy.
4. Data collection, measurement and research on clients and their social media profiles.

The data also indicated important issues associated with the expanded use of ICTs. These involve:

1. Client preferences for service delivery
2. Agencies' expectations regarding ICT opportunities and use
3. The need for a systematic approach by agencies to ICT planning

Agencies want a clearer sense of how ICTs could be used to serve clients in the most appropriate manner. Currently, ICTs are being used unevenly: some agencies use them quite extensively, while others are still experimenting. Few agencies appear to have systematic organizational plans in place for introducing and using ICTs. Developing such plans requires understanding and addressing the challenges that are inherent in ICT use which, in turn,

requires broad conversation within the settlement sector – and, possibly, beyond - regarding expectations and opportunities for ICT use.

4. Challenges and Capacity Issues Impinging on ICT Use

Formidable challenges confront the sector as a whole with regards to the introduction of transformative ICTs. Many of these constraints will need to be addressed, not at the level of individual agencies, but, at the sector level, by umbrella organizations or agency coalitions.

Key challenges identified by the ICT Committee report include:

- ICT will challenge the importance of agency location for resource allocation, partnership formation, and service delivery. So too will ‘tech-savvy’ clients. These developments will threaten smaller agencies and may erode collaboration.
- Scale and reluctance to invest in technologies that could be copied by competitors are significant impediments to ICT investment. Collective approaches will need to be fostered to sharing costs and eliciting participation in important large-scale initiatives such as client data integration and distance education for pre and post--arrival services.
- CIC funding is primarily directed to purchasing direct services for newcomers. Scant support is available to institutions for capacity building, including for ICT. The same holds for other sponsors– such as United Way – that the sector has relied on for capacity-building. New methods and new sources will be required to finance ICT development.

5. Recommendations

Six recommendations are made in the report by the ICT Committee:

1. That a comprehensive survey be undertaken of existing and projected uses of ICT by settlement organizations. The survey should examine ICT opportunities and barriers to expansion, including perceptions of client preferences, capacity issues, and impediments resulting from the need to interface with CIC systems.
2. That the national, provincial and regional umbrella associations initiate a national ICT review aimed at creating a plan for capitalizing on the opportunities that ICT offers to settlement agencies. The plan should address how to promote ICT investment, how to encourage collaborative and open exchanges regarding ICT use among agencies, and what role CIC could play.
3. That the settlement sector establish a promising practice repository where agencies searching for ICT ‘solutions’ could exchange information with other agencies that already have experience in the area. This exchange would be integrated with the Agency of the Future project.

4. That CIC encourage ICT investment in its calls for proposals (CFPs) by expressly including ICT within the category of 'Indirect Services', 'eligible activities' and 'eligible costs'. CIC should also consider CFPs for ICT development in designated areas.
5. The settlement sector and CIC should initiate a joint project to promote coherence in ICT development and use, and to ensure that data can be easily integrated and aggregated. Related to this, CIC should take the lead in facilitating linkages between proprietary local, customized data and data gathered for departmental performance measurement systems, activity reporting, and financial management systems.
6. Provincial and regional umbrella associations should offer staff and executive training in the application and use of ICT.