



Executive Summary

Media Awareness Network (MNet) is a Canadian not-for-profit centre for media literacy and digital literacy. MNet has prepared this paper as a formal submission to the Digital Economy Consultation process that was launched on May 10, 2010 by the Minister of Industry Canada, in conjunction with the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages.

This submission principally addresses the fifth theme of the consultation paper, “Building Digital Skills for Tomorrow”. However, as the consultation paper demonstrates, the topic of skills is a cross-cutting theme. Issues related to development of the skills Canadians need in the digital economy also arise in the sections on innovation, infrastructure, the information and communication technologies (ICT) sector and digital media.

The consultation paper notes that Canada has fallen behind a number of other countries in the development of a digital economy. Countries like the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and most recently the United States, have made digital literacy a cornerstone of their digital economy strategies. If Canada wishes to improve its digital advantage and build sustainable prosperity, we must do likewise.

This submission asserts that there is a connection between Canada’s declining performance in the digital economy and our failure to develop a national strategy that balances investments in technology and infrastructure with investments in the skills and knowledge Canadians need to use ICTs to improve the quality of their lives, increase productivity throughout the private and public sectors, develop innovative products and services, and create new media and digital content.

Digital literacy is that next step which gives Canadians the adaptive abilities they need to participate fully in the global digital society. It guarantees they will benefit from the digital economy and derive new opportunities for employment, innovation, creative expression, and social inclusion.

Attaining this demands a comprehensive national plan to ensure citizens have the resources to learn how to *access, use, understand* and *create* with digital technology. A national digital literacy strategy requires support throughout the K-12 and post-secondary educational systems, as well as programs that offer job training and skills development, drive new business practices, and promote increased public awareness.

Established and internationally accepted definitions of digital literacy are generally built on three principles:

- the skills and knowledge to **access and use** a variety of digital media software applications and hardware devices, such as a computer, a mobile phone, and Internet technology
- the ability to critically **understand** digital media content and applications
- the knowledge and capacity to **create** with digital technology.

The concept of digital literacy expands notions of traditional media literacy and is tailored for today’s dynamic, electronic mediums of communication and interaction. Practical skills form the foundation for the development of





higher-level digital literacy skills that move users beyond participation in the digital economy towards the transformative areas of innovation, constructive social action, and critical and creative thinking.

In addition to the personal benefits of greater opportunities for learning, employment, and enjoyment, a digital literacy strategy will generate significant economic and social benefits for all Canadians.

These include:

- Increased consumer confidence and trust in the online marketplace
- Supporting Canada's capacity to innovate with digital technologies in the general workplace, health-care, and educational sectors
- Supporting the growth of Canada's information and communications technology industries
- Supporting the development of Canadian digital media content

The implementation of a successful strategy for the development of digital literacy skills must have multiple components that address barriers for specific demographics such as: attitude, age, socio-economic status, language, and regional availability of resources. Strategies to increase digital literacy levels must account for these different barriers and, where necessary, implement targeted programs for specific populations and situations.

Evidence and best practice indicate that effective implementation of digital literacy programs should take place in four interlocking spheres of influence: Education, Job Training, Government, and Public Awareness and Community Programs. Efficient facilitation of such an approach demands stewardship at the federal level.

As the lead department in Canada's Digital Economy Consultation process, and the department that has traditionally driven Canada's digital agenda, Industry Canada is well-situated to oversee the establishment of a national plan for digital literacy that draws on the knowledge of the essential contributors to the digital literacy landscape. With the considerable expertise that already exists nationally, and the research and models that have been developed to support digital literacy strategies in other countries, the time is right for Industry Canada to implement a Canadian model for digital literacy skills development as a cornerstone of a national plan for the digital economy.

Recommendations

To ensure that all Canadians have access to essential training in digital literacy skills and that investments in technology and broadband infrastructure development be balanced by investments in digital literacy skills development, the federal government – most notably Industry Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and Heritage Canada – should:

1. Immediately create a digital literacy taskforce comprising key stakeholders at all levels of government (both federal and provincial/territorial), as well as those representing business and communities across Canada, to develop a cross-jurisdictional blueprint for a **National Digital Literacy Strategy**.
2. Support the implementation of a national study of students and teachers, to determine, from each of their perspectives, the digital skills that are needed by Canadian children and youth.





3. Within one year host a **Digital Literacy Stakeholder Conference** that brings together a broader group of stakeholders from all four spheres of implementation to develop and launch a coordinated national strategy focused on strengthening digital literacy in Canada as a fundamental cornerstone of the digital economy strategy and to highlight government digital literacy initiatives.

In preparation for this conference, the Digital Literacy Taskforce should:

- Prepare an **inventory of digital literacy programs in Canada**, including those provided by the federal government, provinces and territories.
- Compile an inventory of **digital literacy initiatives currently being implemented in other jurisdictions** such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and the US, including rationale, targets, and results to date.
- Review the **results of and the lessons learned** from previous Canadian targeted digital literacy initiatives.
- Review the **current and potential roles of federal departments and agencies** in leading and supporting a whole-of-government approach to the development of digital literacy.
- Develop a **national balance sheet** comparing investments in technology development and infrastructure access with investments in digital literacy.

The Digital Literacy Taskforce should also study the following policy options and prepare recommendations for consideration by the conference. Such options should include:

- Launching a **comprehensive federal/provincial/territorial digital literacy initiative** aimed at fostering digital literacy in:
 - K-12 and post-secondary learning institutions,
 - the marketplace, particularly among small- and medium-sized enterprises,
 - the general public.
- Creating a **national facilitator** for digital media cooperative education programs and placements.
- Establishing **community technology centers** in rural Canada as well as a national program to implement training amongst citizens – especially those who may be regionally, economically or socially disadvantaged.
- Increasing **collaborative research funding and commercialization support** for digital media at the federal and provincial levels, using the program innovations launched by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council as a model for action.
- Developing an **online digital portal** that incorporates easy to understand explanations of digital media, tutorials on how to use digital technology, links to relevant government resources, an easy to use forum where users can post questions about digital media, and a community resource section where users can find more information about digital resources in their communities.
- Creating an **online data portal** where public information created across all forms of government and by any public institution is regularly published in a machine-readable format.
- Establishing and maintaining a **digital media knowledge transfer network** for educators and companies to share information on digital media education and job training initiatives.