Citizen F1RST

The Human Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

- What are the implications of the pandemic on citizens?
- How is the public sector adapting and modernizing?
- What are key factors to consider to embrace the "new normal"?

Image Source: International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers

JOINT COUNCIL'S EXECUTIVE MONTHLY REPORT
Developed by the Research Committee
October 2020

1.   Introduction

The Human Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic impacts all segments of the population in significant ways. According to a recent study, the ongoing pandemic has had a devastating impact on the mental health of people around the world. Every individual has been affected by the closure of schools, businesses, and government offices. Physical distancing and wearing a mask in our daily lives comes with challenges that impacts how we interact and access services and supports.

The COVID-19 disease is much more than a health crisis. It is a human, economic and social crisis. According to the United Nations, early evidence indicates that the health and economic impacts of the virus disproportionately affects people living in poverty, older adults, persons with disabilities, youth, and indigenous peoples.

Older People: Older adults (especially those with chronic health conditions) are at risk of infection from COVID-19. In addition to being at greater health risk, older adults are likely to be less capable of supporting themselves during self-isolation. Although social distancing is necessary to reduce the spread of the disease, if not implemented correctly, such measures can also lead to increased social isolation of older adults at a time when they may be at most need of support.

Persons with disabilities: Disability alone may not be related to higher risk for getting COVID-19 or having severe illness. However, some people with disabilities might be at a higher risk of infection or severe illness because of their underlying medical conditions.

Youth: Young people (aged 15 to 24) are particularly vulnerable to the disruptions of the pandemic. Many are at risk of being left behind in education, economic opportunities, and health and wellbeing during a crucial stage of their life development.

Indigenous peoples: According to a report published by the Yellow Head Institute, due to the history of high rates of infectious disease in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities, the implications of COVID-19 on the indigenous populations could be devastating. Indigenous communities are in a uniquely vulnerable position when it comes to COVID.

2. Government Response Efforts

Since COVID-19 emerged, government agencies have been able to address diverse challenges to assume essential new roles. Whether enacting (and enforcing) unique public safety protocols or establishing plans and programs to support citizens and businesses make ends meet. Governments have rushed to migrate essential programs and services online to enable accessibility to the public while reducing social contact.

In many cases, prior to COVID-19, government agencies around the world have been embracing digital services with enthusiasm. Some jurisdictions were thinking about these kinds of initiatives before the pandemic struck. However, recently published research indicates the pandemic has accelerated those efforts. The following areas are some examples of how the public sector in Canada utilized digital services to aid citizens and businesses.

Overall, the pandemic has proved that when change is needed, government organizations *can* adapt and modernize quickly.
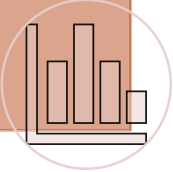
- Online intake tools for support and services (i.e. financial aid support: Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB))

Intake Tools

- Digital tools to help Canadians access information on COVID-19 to keep the public safe and informed. For example British Columbia's webpage on COVID-19 response and Information.

Access to Information

- Online tools to renew documents such as driver license permits. For example, the City of Edmonton's online tool for business licensing and permit applications.

Document Renewal

- New technological changes to the justice system. For example, the Ontario Court of Justice recent implementation of virtual hearings and transition from paper to digital files.

Court System
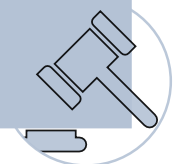
3. Challenges of Remote Work During COVID-19

The spread of COVID-19 has led governments to enact unprecedented measures to try to limit the spread of the virus. In addition to restricting travel and canceling large events, governments around the world have been forced to rethink their ways of working. While some of the workforce (such as health and health services staff) are still working on-site, a majority of the remaining workforce in the public sector has been encouraged or even mandated to work remotely.

Working remotely under these circumstances means adapting to a new environment and battling a new set of challenges. In order to continue working efficiently and create value under these new circumstances, organizations need to understand the limitations public sector employees face working remotely and explore new ways to support specific situations and needs.

The following areas are some examples of limitations public sector employees might face working remotely.

Home Office Space

According to Statistics Canada, 40 per cent of Canada's workers began working from home as pandemic lockdowns were enforced. Employees that do not have a home office space may struggle focusing and delivering the same output they did in an office environment. The potential health risks associated with working from your living room or bedroom includes poor posture and increased aches and pains.

Brainstorming & Collaboration Barriers

One of the most significant challenges staff are facing is communication. The pandemic has essentially eliminated face to face access to peers, and brainstorming sessions over coffee. Staff working remotely can no longer walk over to a colleague's desk to chat, or schedule a meeting. All these communication blocks are taking a major toll on employee engagement and morale.

Slow or Limited Internet Access

Despite technological advancements, some parts of the country experience slow or limited internet access. Staff with poor or unreliable internet connection experience internet glitches and/or poor video-conferencing quality. Staff may be unable to access their work, participate in virtual meetings, and connect with colleagues.

Decision Making Barriers

The limited ability to bring external and internal stakeholders together in-person for the foreseeable future adds more difficulty to decision-making. How senior leaders engage virtually in key decision-making processes with stakeholders and internal team members in ways that enhance trust, transparency, and teamwork is imparetive. The crisis offers a critical opening to rethink how decision-making is distributed and managed in organizations.

1. Remote Collaboration Facing the challenges of COVID-19
2. More Canadians will be working from home post-pandemic, StatCan data suggests

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4.   Embracing the "new normal" By Using Innovative Approaches

Since March, adapting to a "new normal" has been a common phrase used in the public sector. As the post-pandemic environment begins to materialize, there are several immediate areas government can focus on to reduce the negative consequences of the pandemic experienced by government employees and the public. In all cases, modern digital capabilities play a pivotal role. According to the United Nations and FCW, key areas include:

the "new normal"

Better remote work capabilities
Continue to explore solutions that address communication and collaboration challenges. For example, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is emerging as a key player to support remote work. AI is helping organizations cater to challenges, optimize workflows and accelerate collaboration.

Streamlined citizen experiences
More than ever before, the client's perception of government effectiveness really matters. It is essential that online services are streamlined and easy to navigate. Customer Experience (CX) efforts should focus on quicker turn around times, omni-channel strategies, and live engagement.

Establishing multi-stakeholder partnerships
Efficiently developing digital and other tools that support the public during a crisis situation requires multi-sectoral collaboration (between government, private sector). Building partnerships is an effective way for government to find new, innovate ways to meet the needs of citizens and soften the impact of the crisis.
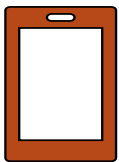
Providing accurate, useful and up-to-date information to people:
Online engagement initiatives led by governments can help people cope with the crisis and improve government operations. In a crisis situation, it is important to reach out to the public, respond to their needs and ensure social stability. Utilizing government websites and social media platforms builds trust and increases transparency.

Accelerating the implementation of innovative digital technologies:
The crisis has demonstrated the need for government to development and adoption of new innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics to ensure an effective provision of public services. The efforts in developing digital government strategies during and after the COVID-19 crisis should focus on improving data protection and digital inclusion policies.
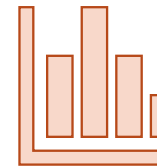
Data Insights:
Emerging data related to the pandemic makes it possible to take a step back and think more strategically about the path forward using data-based insights. Data-based insights are instrumental in formulating an effective organizational roadmap and anticipating (and overcoming) potential hurdles along the way. Data-based insights are essential to support decision-making on multiple issues, including the ability to serve clients and staff safety and well-being.

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5. Digital by Default:
Key Considerations of Digital Government

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital progress. Despite the rush towards digital government, key areas that must be considered to ensure the effective roll-out and delivery of services include:

Accessibility

Now, more than ever, websites and web applications need to be available for everyone, regardless of ability. The importance of accessing critical public services online has increased significantly; the need for digital accessibility has never been more apparent. It is essential for public sector teams to discover, understand and resolve digital accessibility issues to meet the growing needs of the citizens and businesses.

Privacy

Federal Privacy Commissioner, Daniel Therrien, recently stated that the pandemic is highlighting weaknesses in Canadian privacy laws. Governments has also seen a rise in malicious cyber activity in terms of frequency, scale and sophistication. To mitigate online privacy risks, public sector privacy legislations at the federal, provincial and territorial levels that govern the collection, use and disclosure of personal information must evolve. Digital Transformation efforts must also emphasize cybersecurity to combat increasing cybercrimes during the pandemic.

Common Factors that Impact Accessibility

Disability: Clients who are deaf, hard of hearing, or visual impaired may experience challenges connecting with digital channels.

Age: Older adults who may experience challenges when using technology due to difficulty using a mouse, tapping on small phone buttons, and/or reading small text.

Language barriers: Clients may experience language barriers when services are offered in a language, they are not proficient in.

Reachability: Clients with limited or no access (i.e. rural areas) to digital technologies or the internet are less likely to fully contribute to and benefit from technological advancements. Read more about the Digital Divide by accessing the Joint Council's March 2020 Executive Monthly Report.

6. Some Final Words

In the initial phases of the pandemic, the need to act urgently drove many organizations' early pandemic decisions. As the pandemic continues, the various short and long term impacts are still to be analyzed and understood. This report is intended to contribute to the wider literature available on the pandemic, specifically its implications on citizens. Further research that explores how the pandemic impacts citizens may inform public sectors response to combat COVID-19.

Public sector leaders need to anticipate changes to policies and regulations as society seeks to avoid, mitigate, and preempt a future health crisis similar to the one we are experiencing today.
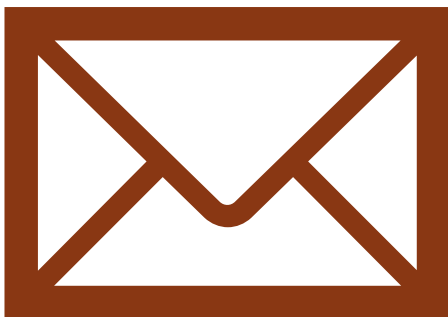
For further reading

- Civil service transformers: adapting to a changing world

- USDA's New Playbook Aims to Improve Digital User Experience

- How can organisations keep people connected in a virtual world?

- Best practices for tech transformation in government

- How AI-powered chatbots are improving services for the disabled

- Trends Driving Digital Customer Experience in COVID19

- No-Contact Government Means More than Just Online Services

Other noteworthy articles:

Cloud computing: the future of public sector analytics

Virtual nursing homes: A new way to care for China's elderly

Gov't adopts cybersecurity measures for nat'l ID system

The 5 Best Ways to Handle Sensitive Data

Research Repository
Access the Citizen First Research Repository here.

Recent entries on the research repository:

Joint Council's Executive Report September 2020.
This executive report explores Contact Centres in the COVID-19 Era

Joint Councils Executive Monthly Report – Special Feature.
This executive report is a concise snapshot of the 2020 E Government Survey.

Trends in the Daily Newsletter

The Ontario government released an action plan to make government services simpler, easier to use, and more convenient and accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

A number of articles addressed the need for improved customer experience (CX). According to an article in CIO.com, "COVID-19 has caused an urgency for CX to be more responsive, provide extra information and guidance, and hyper-personalize experiences."
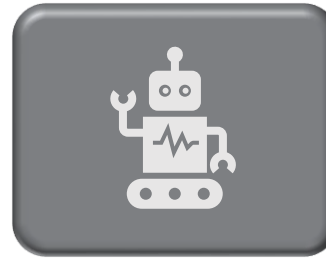
A recent article highlighted the top 10 artificial intelligence (AI) government projects in the world.

Canada is amongst the countries listed. The report specifically highlights Canada's AI Investment in Research and Talent.
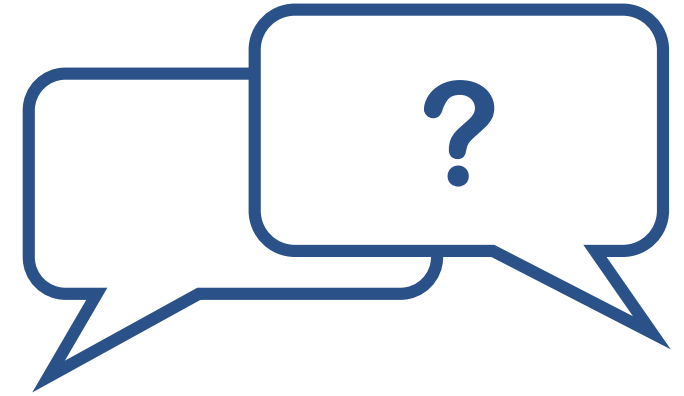
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