Crafting Digital Policy in the Open in British Columbia

A Digital Service Network Spotlight

DSN Spotlights are short-form project profiles that feature exciting work happening across our network of digital government practitioners. Spotlights celebrate our members' stories, lift up actionable takeaways for other practitioners, and put the artifacts we host in the DSN Resource Library in context.

Background

Following a number of high-profile information technology (IT) projects that struggled to meet intended outcomes in British Columbia (BC), Canada, the government recognized a need to improve its digital service delivery to better meet the needs and expectations of residents, leading to the creation of BC's Digital Principles.

However, staff soon realized they needed further guidance to translate the principles into their day-to-day work. In response, the Digital Office (DO) developed a Digital Code of Practice (DCOP) to make tangible for staff "what good looks like when developing digital products and services."

To develop the DCOP, the DO used an innovative open-design process, from which they produced effective guidance on how to pursue digital transformation in government, including how BC can prioritize reconciliation with Indigenous peoples through digital work.

To learn more about the DCOP, the Beeck Center's Digital Service Network (DSN) spoke with two staff members from the DO—Director of Digital Strategy Amy Kirtay and Team Lead Annie Goodwin.

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British Columbia's strategy for digital transformation

The DCOP is the most recent addition to a set of interconnected initiatives to "deliver excellent digital services" in the province. Together with the Digital Plan and Digital Principles, the DCOP guides BC's digital transformation efforts. The Digital Plan, Digital Principles, and DCOP are in dialogue with the Province's Core Policy and Procedures Manual (CPPM), a compilation of BC government policy:

> Developed to set the Province's broad strategic technology direction, the Digital Plan formally sits outside the policy hierarchy of the CPPM, outlining four broad missions—connected services, digital trust, reliable and sustainable technology, and digitally equipped BC Public Service—each with its own calls to action and success metrics.
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> The Province's Digital Principles are nested in the CPPM chapter on information technology and information management to guide the digital transformation of operations and services. While the Principles articulate the direction and priorities of the Province, in practice, employees have found it challenging to make connections between the Principles and their own work. The gaps left by the Principles prompted the development of the DCOP.

"We had the Principles that were high-level and aspirational—but folks didn't know what they meant, how they were supposed to 'do' them, or or what they should look like, " Team Lead Annie Goodwin shared. "We needed something that gave greater clarity."

Securing executive buy-in was instrumental to meet this need and get the DCOP initiative started. "The chief information officer and chief digital officer were big drivers of the work, recognizing the need for operational supports to help staff meet our strategic direction," Goodwin said.

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> **ANNIE GOODWIN**
> Team Lead, Digital Investment Office, Province of British Columbia

Importantly, in kicking off the DCOP, DO staff were intentional about creating a "digital"—rather than "technology"—code of practice: "The 'digital' choice was made to reflect that we're not just talking about technology," Goodwin emphasized. "We're talking about skills and ways of working. It's not just about technology choices. It's also about creating a culture that supports a digital government."

After deciding on the "digital" approach and gaining the support of executives, the DO turned its attention to creating a development strategy for the DCOP.

An open approach to crafting a digital code of practice

Initially, the DO developed the DCOP in a "traditional" way, using a mostly internal team process that relied on consulted experts. But the DO team became concerned that this approach would only reproduce the silos that often characterize digital development and that they hoped to upend through their work.

In an effort to "practice the Practices" by working in the open, the DO released two open drafts of the DCOP: one on digital.gov.bc.ca that was intended for external audience engagement via email, and another posted on an internal site on BC's intranet designed for staff engagement with the draft. The engagement platform allowed both internal staff and external vendors to comment on the draft, as well as reply to and upvote the comments of others.

In January 2023, the DO opened the platform and also welcomed feedback from external users via email. According to Goodwin and Kirtay, some of the most helpful feedback originated from "non-digital" staff who pushed for further clarification on terminology. Goodwin found this feedback vital, as the DO's goal was to "write policy for everyone, not just for folks that self-identified as 'technical.'"

Although the open draft received high levels of engagement, the drafting process was not without challenges. Non-anonymous, open commenting could be at odds with the culture of government hierarchy, and subject matter experts at times felt protective of their domains. Many staff were used to the more traditional model of being "consulted and then endorsers," Kirtay shared. "But we weren't looking for endorsers, we were looking for collaborators." Some people did not want to participate in public commenting, opting instead to send emails with their feedback directly to the DO team. Kirtay acknowledged the vulnerability of working in the open: "When you de-silo organizations it can potentially expose folks in a way that they haven't been exposed before," she said.

But whether shared publicly via the engagement platform, or privately via email, the DO worked to address all forms of feedback and engagement with the draft to be as inclusive as possible. "We took your feedback even if you refused to participate in the way we wanted you to. We took it, we listened and, where we could, we used it—or explained why we couldn't," Goodwin told us.

To do this, and to maintain accountability, the DO kept public change logs as they updated the content of the DCOP. Logs noted which portions of the draft were changed and the reasoning behind the changes, citing specific feedback received through engagement with the open draft.

According to Goodwin, the change logs were essential in addressing unease staff felt about the open process: "Any time we updated the open draft, we said what we changed, why we changed it, and when we changed it," she said. "This helped with some uncomfortable conversations, because we could say, 'Look, we did make a change. We didn't change it exactly the way you wanted it, but we did take your feedback, and this is what we did with it.'"

Connecting digital practices to Indigenous reconciliation

The DCOP content reflects the values of BC government. "I think how we developed our [code of practice] is something that makes ours different," Goodwin shared, "But the other thing that makes ours unique is our tenth practice, which focuses on reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The other nine practices are reflective of what you might see from other jurisdictions. The tenth one is unique to us."

This tenth practice—Express cultural and historical awareness and respect—makes clear connections between "the historical relationships, inequity, trauma, and discrimination created by government" and the work of digital service delivery. It was one of the original Digital Principles that staff had the most difficulty putting into practice. "I kept hearing things from folks like, 'As a technologist I don't know how to apply cultural and historical awareness and respect to building an IT system,'" Kirtay shared. But the DO knew it couldn't stay quiet on this Principle, and that getting it right in the DCOP was essential to helping staff operationalize it.

In developing guidance for this tenth principle in the DCOP, Goodwin drew on what she had seen and done in her previous work in the natural resource sector to emphasize how actions around data governance and information management can support a more respectful and equity-focused relationship with Indigenous peoples.

The DCOP illustrates how digital work can be applied to reconciliation efforts, for example by enabling Indigenous individuals to reclaim their Indigenous names using Indigenous characters.

What's next for DCOP?

BC will publish the iterated version of the DCOP in the CPPM in Fall 2023, followed by a communications campaign that will socialize the official DCOP and help staff apply it to their work, as well as highlight the work ministries are already doing in alignment with the code.

But even once integrated into the CPPM, the DO team doesn't plan to view the DCOP as "finished." Instead, they will continue working closely with ministries to research the spectrum of use cases for the DCOP and refine, adapt, and update the code to deepen the ways staff see their work captured in it.

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AMY KIRTAY
Director of Digital Strategy, Digital Investment Office, Province of British Columbia

"The DCOP is a living document that's going to shift and adapt as we continue learning," Kirtay said. "The 10 core practices will stay firm, but the content within each one will adapt based on what's happening in external environments, what's happening in our internal environments, and the needs of staff."

In the longer term, Kirtay also anticipates that the wide implementation of the DCOP may unearth other challenges, like instances where existing policy inhibits the application of certain practices. Kirtay looks forward to leading the charge on tackling downstream challenges like these to reshape government operations in line with the DCOP.

Lessons learned

Working in the open supports better outcomes. By engaging in an open drafting process, the DO created transparency and accountability not often present within government. Drafting in the open also broke down historic silos between teams within BC government, giving rise to perspectives and collaboration that may not have otherwise surfaced. As a result, the DO gleaned deeper and more impactful insights about the DCOP that led to a better policy in the end

Tactical, plain-language guidance can help everyone see themselves reflected in the work of digital transformation. In drafting the DCOP, the DO set out to create "policy for everyone," which meant using simple language and clarifying esoteric terminology for non-subject matter experts. "Respectfully, we weren't writing the DCOP for the folks that are already knee-deep in this topic," Goodwin said. The DO wrote the DCOP to ensure the Digital Plan and Digital Principles could be accessible and legible to all staff, no matter their title or role — an important prerequisite for operationalizing and scaling digital best practices in government.

Resources and artifacts

To see how this work was put into practice, explore the following assets in the DSN Resource Library:

+ BC Digital Plan
+ BC Digital Principles GitHub engagement site
+ BC Digital Code of Practice
+ Internal engagement platform's landing page for DCOP feedback (screenshot)
+ Blog post from Annie on working in the open
+ Livestream recording with Amy, Annie, and BC's Chief Digital Officer Gen Lambert on working in the open