

Technology Through the Eyes of Ontario's Literacy Support Organizations

Report

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction	5
Methodology.....	5
Sample.....	5
Approach	5
Results	6
Technology Categories.....	6
Social Media	6
Infographics.....	7
Web-based Training and Web Conferencing Programs.....	8
Web Hosting Tools	9
Survey or Other Research/Evaluation Tools	10
Desktop Publishing Software	11
Database Tools	11
File Sharing Tools	12
Specialized Technology	13
Planning for Technology Use	14
Budgeting for Technology Use	14
Blended Learning & Technology	15
Program Preparedness.....	15
Literacy Support Organization Response(s).....	16
Supports Required for Technology Use	16
Opportunity Costs with Technology	17
More Technology Equals More Impact.....	18
Future Technological Impacts	18
For Better	18
For Worse.....	19
Support Organizations' Suggestions	19
Conclusion.....	22

Executive Summary

Contact North | Contact Nord commissioned this report to develop a better understanding of how, where and to what effect technology is currently being used by Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) support organizations in Ontario. The report examines how LBS support organizations currently plan for and resource technology, ways that this planning could be optimized, and opportunities that could be developed with technology planning and resource improvements. It identifies opportunities that may be missed as a result of a lack of technology.

Twenty-one (21) of the province's 27 literacy support organizations provided information for this report. Centre Fora, Ningwakwe Press, Contact North and AlphaPlus were not asked to participate because the focus of this report is on support organizations that work directly with Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs. Two regional literacy networks did not participate.

Literacy support organizations use a variety of technological tools, but there is great variety amongst the tools used. Key factors in the purchase and use of technology are available funds, exposure to technology, and skills possessed by literacy support organization staff. Additional technology is desired by almost all literacy support organizations, but technology purchases have historically been made via project funding – a source of funding that is no longer available through the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD and formerly MTCU). Many literacy support organizations rely upon other funding and/or reserve funds to purchase and maintain technology.

Literacy support organizations do not use formal planning processes for technology because limited core budgets do not warrant this approach. Rather, support organizations that participated in this research approach technology planning in a more organic way, looking to replace only what is most needed on an annual basis, and pay for annual subscriptions for web hosting, web domains, SurveyMonkey accounts, GoToWebinar, etc.

A key priority in Ontario is blended learning and supporting Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs in its integration. LBS support organizations assess their current and ongoing technology needs to align with this priority.

Survey results associated with this report show that many of Ontario's LBS programs require more support to integrate blended learning into their programming. Literacy support organizations voiced a need to interact with member programs to assess their capacity for blended learning, to offer relevant professional development, and to develop and share tools that will assist LBS programs with assessing their own blended learning performance and progress.

In order to embrace technology fully, literacy support organizations require more funding to purchase and maintain technology as well as funding to enable staff to use technology, particularly social media, which is critical to permit many support organizations to achieve their missions to communicate and inform.

Ontario's literacy support organizations have identified several areas in which technology could enhance their work: Literacy Service Planning, supporting blended learning, more effective use of social media, management, collaboration, communication, technology management, research and the sharing of best practices.

Notwithstanding the challenges, Ontario's literacy support organizations recognize the growing impact of technology upon the programs they serve and have shown a remarkable ability to develop technological capacity to fulfill their mandates. With greater focus, support from capable organizations like Contact North and AlphaPlus, and recognition and funding from the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD), the support organizations can continue to evolve, innovate, and collaborate to use technology to its fullest to support the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program.

Introduction

Computers and associated technology play an increasing role in the delivery of services; Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) support organizations in Ontario are no exception. Literacy support organizations use technology to support the work of LBS service delivery programs.

This research was undertaken to develop a better understanding of how, where and to what effects technology is currently being used by LBS support organizations, as well as to look at how LBS support organizations plan for and resource technology, and opportunities that may be missed as a result of lack of technology.

Contact North | Contact Nord, which commissioned this report as the literacy support organization that supports e-Channel delivery, is particularly interested in the LBS field's ability to support blended learning and in learning more about support organizations' plans to support its increase.

Methodology

Sample

There are 27 Literacy support organizations in Ontario. The majority of them (23) are regional, sectoral or stream-based support organizations. Two – Centre Fora and Ningwakwe Learning Press – are primarily involved in publishing and/or translation. As such, they were not a focus for this survey, which was aimed at organizations that support Literacy and Basic Skills in ways not involving publishing and/or translation.

The remaining two Literacy Support organizations – Contact North and AlphaPlus – were also not invited to participate in this survey. As their primary role is to provide technological support, and most, if not all, of their resources and activities are devoted to this purpose, these organizations were deemed not to be part of the scope of this inquiry.

The goal was to receive information from every included literacy support organization (23). A total of 21 survey responses were gathered, as two regional networks did not participate.

Approach

The researcher hired to conduct the survey developed a list of draft questions, which were then shared with Contact North. Contact North's feedback was integrated in the final survey questions.

This survey was administered via telephone interview during which the researcher asked the questions of the interviewees and recorded their responses. A draft of the conversation notes was then shared with the interviewee who was then invited to revise the draft as necessary to ensure accuracy. The results of the 21 telephone interviews were used to provide the information that follows in this report.

Results

Technology Categories

Rather than ask a general question such as “What technology does your network use?”, technology categories were provided for Literacy Support organizations to consider and use to organize their responses. The categories were not intended to limit the conversation, nor to imply that these are the only types of technology that literacy support organizations currently use or should use.

The categories addressed are: Social Media; Infographics; Web-based Training and Web Conferencing Programs; Web Hosting Tools; Survey or Other Research/Evaluation Tools; Desktop Publishing Software; Database Tools; and Filing Sharing Tools. Each category will be further explored in this report, with responses summarized and grouped according to Uses, Challenges and Opportunities and, where applicable, Costs.

Social Media

Every literacy support organization that participated in the survey uses social media tools to some extent. Some use just one social media tool, others two or more. Only some support organizations are confident in their use of social media. Those organizations that are not confident stated that they do not use social media to its full capacity due to a lack of training, a lack of human and financial resources, or both.

Uses

- Several literacy support organizations differentiated between being “curators” and “generators” of content. According to the [Huffington Post](#), “Social media content curation is simply filtering through all the interesting content across the web and sharing the best news, articles, videos and infographics on your social channels.” By contrast, social media content generation is the production and sharing of new content. The overwhelming majority of literacy support organizations are curating social media content, sharing out literacy-related information, following local agencies, and promoting training.
- Whether curating or generating content, there is variance in how the literacy support organizations use social media. While some use it as a primary way of connecting with and supporting programs; others have identified that they do not use social media for this purpose because they have other avenues of connecting with their programs. Instead, they use social media to promote key messages about literacy. Some support organizations identified that they use social media not just to spread literacy-related information, but also to gather and spread information on employment, poverty-reduction efforts, apprenticeship, etc.

- Various support organizations are coordinating their use of social media, using tools like Hootsuite to organize their social media content and save time sharing information across multiple social media channels.
- Some support organizations are collaborating using social media to save on time and resources. For example, the Northern Networks share one Facebook account and one Twitter account among them, rather than each of the three networks investing time and expertise.

Challenges and Opportunities

As was indicated earlier, many of the literacy support organizations reported that they do not have the human or financial resources they need to effectively maintain social media presences. Some literacy support organizations post to social media (and to several types of social media) daily, while others only post 3-4 times a month. They definitely lack the resources to move from being content curators to content generators. At least one literacy support organization indicated that its programs do not have sufficient training in social media, making it difficult for the support organization to connect with and support the programs via this method.

There may be opportunities for support organizations to work more collaboratively with social media, to maximize human and financial resources.

Costs

The main cost associated with using social media is the time it takes to learn how to use it, amass content, distribute it, and respond to social media messages. One survey respondent said that social media is “an underused aspect of technology” but as another respondent commented, “I’d like to learn more about social media, but I don’t have the time.”

Infographics

According to Wikipedia, infographics are “graphic visual representations of information, data or knowledge intended to present information quickly and clearly. They can improve cognition by utilizing graphics to enhance the human visual system’s ability to see patterns and trends.”

Literacy support organizations communicate with a wide range of stakeholders, including literacy programs, employment programs, community agencies, unions, and government. In the age of “less is more,” literacy support organizations have looked to new ways of providing information, especially statistical information, making infographics more and more desirable. Not all of the respondent literacy support organizations interviewed currently use infographics. Some use them but only if they are statistically sound and accessible. Others would like to use more infographics, but don’t know how to create them and/or don’t have the funding to purchase this service from companies that can produce them.

Programs that have been used to generate infographics by or for literacy support organizations are: Word, free online generators, Canva, GoogleSheets, Venngage, Publisher or Vimeo.

Uses

Literacy support organizations identified several uses for infographics. A number of survey respondents noted that infographics are useful for reports and funding proposals, as well as for awareness and promotion and for Literacy Service Planning (to document program/community results). Others use infographics during presentations with community stakeholders and to showcase program statistics, including year-over-year changes. The use of infographics, for some support organizations, is a newer, more modern way of presenting information. It's also a more effective way of presenting information for individuals who rely more upon visual learning.

Challenges and Opportunities

Survey respondents noted the potential for “over-using” infographics or not being critical enough about the sources behind the infographics. Concerns were also noted about accessibility (for website application). Another respondent described infographics as a form of charts and graphs – just another way of presenting information in diverse ways.

There may be opportunities for support organizations to share an infographic account or share expertise. As one respondent said, “I’d like to see province-wide impact.” Many support organizations gather and analyze data and infographics could be a tool to share results of literacy programming provincially.

Costs

There are free infographic generators available online, but they should be used with caution. Some programs will allow you to generate an infographic, but not publish it (or use it) without paying a subscription fee. The costs to use infographic generators are not significant (\$20/month), but it's the costs of learning programs and gathering information that can be used to generate infographics that are high, particularly for organizations that have only 1-2 staff.

Web-based Training and Web Conferencing Programs

As technology has spread across almost all areas of employment, the use of online training and web conferencing has also grown. All literacy support organizations either offer web-based training themselves, access web-based training for their own professional development, or promote web-based training created by other sources to their local programs. Some of these organizations have purchased subscriptions or licenses for web conference software to manage their network's training. These include GoToWebinar/GoToMeeting, Big Blue Button, Google Hangouts, Adobe Connect, and Click Meeting. Others don't have their own subscription, but collaborate with organizations that know how to do the “back-end” set up associated with running a webinar to present their own content.

By far the most commonly used webinar program is GoToWebinar with 12 respondents using it actively. GoToWebinar's popularity may have developed primarily from word of mouth. As one respondent says, “Did I research a bunch of webinar programs? No...I bought what I liked and found worked. I don't have the time to do this kind of research. When you're working alone...”

A newer source – Click Meeting – is preferred by one network because it's easy for participants to access.

Uses

Literacy support organizations are using web-based training and conferencing programs for numerous reasons and applications. They use them to save money because you don't have to feed people, rent facilities or pay for travel with online training. In terms of application, literacy support organizations are using these programs to highlight best practices: to connect with stakeholders and board members; to provide training and professional development; for Literacy Service Planning and other regional meetings; and to host meetings when travel becomes challenging or impossible.

Challenges and Opportunities

Consistent access to webinar programs with which users find easy access is a challenge. Some respondents noted that they only purchase a subscription to this type of program when there is project funding as core funding budgets do not allow for these purchases (about \$1000/year).

Accessing webinars versus accessing face-to-face professional development is favourable to many literacy agencies in Ontario because it saves them both time and money. In addition, webinar programs allow for recording, so the training is accessible at times convenient to the user if they cannot attend the webinar on the day(s) it is scheduled. One respondent noted that they would like to be able to add captions to webinars – to further increase accessibility – but they do not have the funding to do so.

Costs

The costs, set up and facilitation knowledge required for purchasing and effectively using web-based training and web conferencing programs can be prohibitive for organizations that are operating with only 1-2 staff and with less than \$100,000 in core funding. On a more positive note, Contact North is able to offer a free platform (Saba Meeting) and to provide technical assistance to promote, prepare and facilitate webinars as well as to support webinar attendees with technical assistance they may require during webinars.

Web Hosting Tools

All literacy support organizations have at least one website that they are responsible for maintaining, and some support organizations have as many as four. The majority of websites are content management sites. The literacy support organizations sub-contract the building or the major revamp of their site to a web developer or consultant and then they (support organization staff or volunteers) populate the site and add content to it. Programs used for site building include WordPress, Drupal, and WIX.

Uses

While some literacy support organizations maintain websites with the bare minimum of information, others have more dynamic sites featuring content that is updated frequently.

Some support organizations have password protected sections of their websites for Board members.

Challenges and Opportunities

Several respondents indicated a desire to modernize their existing website(s), but do not currently have the funds. One respondent noted that their website is “kind of static because we have to rely on volunteers.” In two regions of the province (the north and the east), regional networks are collaborating to develop joint websites, to reduce the cost and time required by each network to continually maintain and update a unique site.

Numerous support organizations stated that they would benefit from website development and maintenance training.

Costs

There are significant costs for building websites, including those for building or revamping websites, site hosting, domain purchase and maintenance, creating and posting content, ensuring website content is up to date, adding resources, considering website search optimization, ensuring their site “pops” on all platforms, and fixing websites. Arranging content on a website can also be a time-consuming activity. Users expect to get to what they want within 3 clicks, so content must be displayed accordingly.

Survey or Other Research/Evaluation Tools

By far the most commonly used survey tool among literacy support organizations is SurveyMonkey. Almost half of the respondents own subscriptions to this service, while 6 indicated they use the account purchased annually by the Learning Networks of Ontario. Respondents also reported the use of Doodle Poll. For research/evaluation, respondents noted the use of MS Excel (Excel), Google Forms, and MS Project.

Uses

Online survey tools are used to conduct evaluation for Literacy Service Planning, for professional development events, for collating conference data and for registration. Excel is used for data entry and organization, but also for analysis via some of the analytical tools (regressions, etc.) to draw trend lines and scatter graphs. One respondent has incorporated a survey function into their website.

Challenges and Opportunities

As one respondent noted, “We got all these things (like a paid subscription to SurveyMonkey) when we had project dollars. Now they are difficult (if not impossible) to maintain.” Administering more nuanced surveys requires access to more costly survey features or the use of other tools such as YouTube.

Excel is a common tool and its potential use for data entry and analysis could represent an opportunity for literacy support organizations.

Costs

The main cost associated with surveying and evaluation is human resources. However, for organizations that have limited funds to purchase hardware and software, even a purchase of \$300 annually (for a basic subscription to SurveyMonkey) can be prohibitive.

Desktop Publishing Software

As has elsewhere been noted, there are far fewer projects being conducted among and by Ontario's literacy support organizations now than in the past. As a result, there are fewer large desktop publishing needs, such as those that are associated with development manuals, large reports and curricula. Numerous support organizations indicate that they "farm out" larger projects because they don't have this expertise in-house. Commonly used publishing software includes Word, Publisher, InDesign, Illustrator, Photoshop, and PowerPoint.

Uses

Literacy support organizations require desktop publishing programs and skills to develop reports, Annual General Meeting invitations and report files, flyers, brochures, and Literacy Service Planning documents. Some also have an iClipArt subscription to give them access to a broader range of images they can use in their print resources without running the risk of improperly using proprietary images that are not for public use. Feedback included the comment that reports are not always the most effective way to communicate information and that "the creation of pdfs is much more prolific than the reading of them."

Challenges and Opportunities

One respondent indicated they would love to have a greater ability to publish information using desktop publishing, particularly as it relates to Literacy Service Planning. Other respondents noted the need for more training in this area, to use existing software.

Costs

The costs of purchasing publishing software and having staff trained in how to use it are probably less than the costs of contracting this work out. Most literacy support organizations do not have funds to sub-contract any other services.

Database Tools

Very few literacy support organizations require database tools. Excel is used by many (12) for the data-entry tasks that are required. Only one support organization indicated they use MS Access. Other tools identified include Google Sheet, EOIS-CaMS (only by one organization), and Custom Contact. One literacy support organization uses a custom database.

Uses

Data entry tools (like advanced Excel) are used to create information and referral forms. A database was identified as a useful tool for tracking Ontario Works information. One respondent was curious under what circumstances a database might prove useful.

Challenges and Opportunities

It would be of value for literacy support organizations to increase their ability to use Excel. It is a flexible program with uses that go far beyond recording financial information and developing spreadsheets.

Costs

The costs to maintain a simple database can be minimal for those using Excel within their MS Office suite, but for more complex database needs and organizational succession planning, training needs must be considered to ensure maintenance of organizational data.

File Sharing Tools

The use of file sharing tools is on the rise and many literacy support organizations are familiar with or using one or more. Due to the nature of file sharing tools – to share files from one organization to another or from one place to another – familiarity with more than one tool is ideal. The most common file sharing tool in use among literacy support organizations is DropBox, followed by Google Drive. Other tools mentioned include: Google Calendar, Google Talks, QuickBooks, Google Forms, Trello (for project management), Slack, MailChimp, Constant Contact, Basecamp, iCloud (through Mac), OneDrive, Asana, PW Works, and an intranet.

Uses

Two primary uses were identified by survey respondents. As communicators, literacy support organizations use file sharing software to share information among each other – to work collaboratively on documents and on projects and to provide access to files that are too large to send through email.

File sharing tools are also used by literacy support organizations to share information with themselves. Some literacy support organizations no longer rent office space. They work out of their homes, usually because there is no money to pay rent. They use file sharing tools to share files with other staff (if there are other staff) or to ensure they have access to the files and information they need no matter where they are. Often, literacy support organization staff must travel to fulfill their roles effectively. Having access to files remotely enables them to work more effectively and efficiently.

Other uses identified for file sharing tools include compressing and archiving information, using analytics associated with some file sharing tools like MailChimp, and the use of multiple file sharing/storage tools to reduce the likelihood of loss of information.

Challenges and Opportunities

As with most things of a technical nature, the challenge with file sharing tools is keeping up with the range of tools that are available and learning how to use them. Unless working from a virtual office, file sharing tools are used less often and are therefore not second nature, requiring relearning each time.

It can be a challenge for literacy support organizations to share information via file sharing tools with program staff and/or Board members as program staff and Board members may not be aware of or willing to learning to use these new technologies.

One respondent noted that a guide on how to use DropBox would be useful. Such a guide does, in fact, exist (http://tic-recherche.crifpe.ca/docs/guides/en/Dropbox_guide.pdf); however, the time it takes to find such products, review them, and apply the learning consistently is prohibitive.

Costs

The costs associated with file sharing tools are associated with the learning curve required to use what each organization prefers.

Specialized Technology

Literacy support organizations were asked to identify any specialized technology they use, or that they could foresee needing. Several respondents had difficulty answering this question, indicating, “It’s hard to say. I don’t know what I don’t know” and went on to say that support organizations are at varying degrees of proficiency with regard to technology. Some have beginner-level skills, some have intermediate and some have advanced. Another respondent noted, “It doesn’t seem to be anyone’s job to assist us with using technology.” Again, the lack of funding was raised with one respondent saying “We tend to buy tech for projects, but not for core activities. We never have any money left from our core budget.”

For those literacy support organizations that identified with using specialized technology, the responses ranged from GIS Mapping software (paid for by a Local Employment Planning Council) to Antidote – a spelling/grammar checker for French – to assistive devices like Drag and Dictate and Live Scribe digital recording pens and recording software like iMovie and Final Cut.

Not all support organizations have the same technology needs. For example, the support organization for the Deaf uses video phones. The use of such phones is critical to their ability to communicate. In addition, the DeafBlind programs must use a lot of specialized and complex technology to modify documents for use with learners. Another support organization has taken a leadership role in supporting its programs with Office 365.

Looking forward, literacy support organizations identified numerous types of technology that they believe will enhance their work:

- Technology to assist with planning – to bring all our planning, online calendars and charts into one place; we’d like to make LSP more innovative and effective (planning)
- More sophisticated technology for webinars – to tell stories and research results; we’d like more professional presentation tools, but have to rely on what we can get for free
- A Smart Board for use with LSP and Board meetings

- Learning management software – to develop courses and online training to support agencies – knowledge mobilization
- Microsoft Moviemaker for professional development that is at our own pace and more flexible – I’d like to be able to offer certificates
- An app for information and referral
- Videoconferencing capability to better support Deaf programs and make service coordination (LSP) meetings more personal and impactful

Planning for Technology Use

Given technology’s growing applications and potential, this research was designed to collect information on the degree to which literacy support organizations plan for the use of technology. Not surprisingly, given the low amount of funding that literacy support organizations can devote to the purchase and maintenance of technological tools, no literacy support organizations have a formal process for planning for technology use.

Some respondents do not see the point of planning and offered comments like, “We never have any money to buy technology.” Others indicated that such planning would be of limited value, given the lack of funding and the lack of human resources, stating, “We just don’t have the capacity to do the planning we would like to do.” Several respondents mentioned that they inventory the technology that they have and, annually, identify a “wish list” so that if funding becomes available, they will know what they want to get. If the organization has funding, they will attempt to replace items that have become outdated (asset management).

One respondent indicated that they “can only ‘grow’ towards free stuff.” Several respondents identified that they use projects to fund their technology deficits.

One support organization identified the challenges that result when the programs it supports has better technology than the support organization. In their words, “Not having technology makes certain activities more challenging – like developing computer-based curricula for programs that you don’t actually own!”

Should support organizations receive additional funding and/or an opportunity to purchase additional technology, then there might be value in developing an asset management/planning tool for technology.

Budgeting for Technology Use

One of the goals of this survey was to develop an understanding of to what extent, if at all, literacy support organizations have budget lines devoted specifically to acquiring and maintaining technology.

Two support organizations have no specific lines for technology – one rolling up such costs with an external contractor and the other saying, “We just hope nothing goes wrong.”

For the other support organizations that do have lines for technology, the types of expenses that are covered by such lines include: memberships, file sharing costs, website maintenance, website hosting, updating web addresses and domains, computer hardware and software, financial accounting software, technical support, anti-virus software, web design, server costs, SurveyMonkey subscription, GoToWebinar costs. The annual amount devoted to such costs varies from organization to organization, and the range is \$150 - \$16,000 with the majority of organizations allocating \$1000-\$2500. Several respondents identified that they typically exceed the amount of funds they have allocated, relying then on other revenue streams or reserve funds to make up the difference.

Blended Learning & Technology

Given the reliance on technology to support blended learning two questions were included in the survey to get a snapshot of literacy support organizations' perceptions of program preparedness or readiness to embrace blended learning as well as any anticipated changes in literacy support organizations' own technology needs to provide support for blended learning to their programs.

Program Preparedness

One literacy support organization indicated they did not know their programs' preparedness to support blended learning, as they have not recently asked this question of their programs.

Six literacy support organizations indicated that the programs they support are split in their preparedness, with some being quite able to support blended learning and others struggling in this area. Those that provided a number between 1 and 10 to describe the level of preparedness (with 1 being not at all and 10 being very prepared) offered numbers between 5 and 8. Two literacy support organizations identified their programs as being a 10 out of 10, noting, "We have a disproportionate number (high) of learners involved in blended learning. Our programs bought into it quickly to manage large wait lists." The other literacy support organization that identified program readiness as a 10 attributed the high rating to the three Contact North Centres in that geographical area, suggesting strong referrals between Contact North Centres and local programs.

There appears to be room for local programs to improve their ability to support blended learning. According to some literacy support organizations, their programs are not all using e-Channel, and they are confused about who gets "credit" for learners. They are uncertain about information and referral protocols and there is a need for more coordination around blended learning. Other support organizations state that practitioners are reluctant to use e-Channel because they don't know what the learner experience will be, or that practitioners are using e-Channel, but only in areas in which the local program's practitioner is not strong, like math.

One support organization indicated that not all learners are meant to be blended learners, and that the literacy field should not lose sight of this, and see blended learning differently, as a solution to long wait lists. Still another support organization sees great promise for blended learning as the area it covers is populated with small towns with no access to literacy programs and, sometimes, no access at all.

Literacy Support Organization Response(s)

When asked how they, as support organizations, plan to respond to program needs related to blended learning, several themes emerged:

- Develop a better understanding of our programs' capacity to move towards blended learning
- Continue to provide, and potentially increase the amount of, professional development related to blended learning
- Increase the profile of blended learning at the Literacy Service Planning (LSP) table(s) – possibly through the use of case studies which can be discussed at the LSP table or to expand the range of LBS programming available in some communities because “no program can be good at all five goal paths, all levels, etc.”
- Bring in guest speakers and increase the profile of e-Channel delivery organizations and other resources
- Identify provincial best practices and share them with practitioners
- Learn more about MAESD's expectations related to blended learning
- Promote the need for an updated compendium of adult-appropriate blended learning opportunities that are free or low-cost
- Improve integration between face-to-face delivery and e-Channel delivery; ask e-Channel providers how they want to see blended learning happen

Supports Required for Technology Use

Each of the literacy support organizations were asked to describe the top 2-3 areas in which they require support related to technology.

Eighteen (18) support organizations identified that they need additional funding. As one respondent noted, “As a support organization, we communicate. We need funding to do this better. We're basically doing it on a wing and a prayer.” More specifically, literacy support organizations would use additional funding to keep software current, to buy hardware and software and to increase technical support when technology is not working.

The second most frequently cited need is more staff. One respondent said, “The job of running a network has changed and the skills have changed.” The need for additional staff was strongly linked to a desire to be more effective with social media.

Another area of high priority for literacy support organizations is training related to the use of technology and wanting to learn more about technology and how it could potentially support the work that literacy support organizations do.

Several support organizations identified a need to explore technology as it pertains to service planning – to explore how technology can be used to better support outlying areas, to track data, and to create and share service planning information.

A need for clarity in terms of roles and responsibilities to guide their analysis of future technology needs was expressed. Blended learning is an expectation – for programs to provide it and for literacy support organizations to assist programs in providing it – but the perception is that there is limited guidance from MAESD regarding what this should look like.

Other needs expressed related to supporting programs in areas like computer asset management/life cycle management and working with other support organizations to achieve efficiencies (human and financial).

Opportunity Costs with Technology

The data suggests strongly that Ontario's literacy support organizations do not have the funds, the staff or the training to maximize the use of technology. Support organizations were asked if they think there are opportunities they are missing and work they could be optimizing if they had more awareness of technology, more technology, and/or the skills and ongoing support to use technology. Every support organization identified opportunities that have been grouped into six main categories:

- Data collection and analysis. As one support organization mentioned, "I could be collecting more data...So much information is not accessible to us. We are supposed to be making evidence-based decisions."
- Social media – the lack of time and resources available to explore and use social media affects literacy support organizations' ability to communicate – with programs, with community partners and with broader stakeholders.
- Collaboration – between literacy support organizations and their members, and between literacy support organizations
- Presentation software – many literacy support organizations spend significant amounts of time preparing and delivering presentations to community members, government and other groups
- Integration of technology. "We're missing out on the integration of technology. We should explore how to take stories and roll them into newsletters and roll them into tweets that roll into funder updates."
- OALCF – one literacy support organization queried if the OALCF was designed with blended learning in mind and suggested that more work needs to be done in this area.

More Technology Equals More Impact

When asked about technology that support organizations need to be proficient in, and how such technology would provide benefit to LBS programs, literacy support organizations had several ideas.

It was identified that support organizations need to make better use of Contact North and AlphaPlus and to receive regular updates about e-Channel (such as which courses are most popular and how this information might be used in service planning).

Increased technology will enable additional forms of communication between literacy support organizations and their programs, for example, in the use of EOIS-CaMS. It could also increase communication between and among literacy support organizations, enabling such organizations to learn more from one another, to engage in more partnerships and to identify and promote key messages.

One literacy support organization referenced a shared database for referrals for Ontario Works, Employment Services, and Literacy and Basic Skills. This database enables systematic analysis of data and the making of evidence-based decisions and perhaps could be a model that has application for the entire province, given that relationships between literacy programs, Ontario Works and Employment Services to best serve their clients is a high priority.

Future Technological Impacts

On a more philosophical level, literacy support organizations were asked if they thought there were any ways in which technology could affect their work (for better or for worse) in the future. Suggestions were offered on both fronts.

For Better

Technology is considered by some literacy support organizations to result in improved services and to foster innovation. It is a tool which can connect literacy support organizations more closely and more frequently to the programs they support.

Technology could play a role in enhanced marketing, potentially bringing more adult learners into adult literacy programs, and facilitating additional referrals.

Some respondents noted the increased impact that technology is having and that support organizations could play a role in promoting the value of digital literacy.

The ability to work virtually via technology is considered “for the better” by some support organizations.

For some support organizations and their members, technology has been identified as both a positive and as a negative. For the Indigenous community, there is a fear that technology may result in further loss, yet the far north programs **are** more interested in technology. Another area where both pros and cons are noted is in the migration of material online. Technology

enables support organizations to put information, resources, and other literacy-related content online, which is good. However, each organization, for the most part, is doing this work independently, which makes the provincial literacy system less “consistent” and may make it more difficult for learners and those who are referring them to understand adult literacy and associated programs.

For Worse

While the benefits of technology are many, there are also concerns about the perceptions that technology can do anything. Several respondents noted the need for a balance between technology and face-to-face interactions, as only people can motivate and engage and much of the work of literacy support organizations depends on the successful development and maintenance of relationships.

Respondents also noted that there are costs associated with continually keeping pace or current with technology in that technology is a constant commitment that requires ongoing investment. If such investment is not forthcoming, then technology could be more of a drain than a support.

Again, literacy support organizations reiterated that technology and learning need to be further explored. Can online learning really replace face-to-face instruction? Under what circumstances? Also, the development of online curriculum requires certain skills and it was suggested that quality instruction should not be sacrificed for quality presentation (online). In other words, moving learning online might enable learners to access more visually stimulating material, but such access may not ultimately result, in all cases, in optimum learning. The skills required to create online content, the skills required to access online content and an understanding of who is best served by online learning may not have been explored yet to the extent that it could and should be. All partners involved in online delivery and blended learning, including practitioners and government, need to be fully informed so as not to do more harm than good.

Support Organizations’ Suggestions

During the telephone interviews with 21 literacy support organizations, survey respondents offered many suggestions that could be acted upon – individually or collaboratively by literacy support organizations, by organizations that support technology in Ontario’s Literacy and Basic Skills Program, or by the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD).

The suggestions are grouped here according to overall themes and are offered for the various audiences to consider as they continue their work supporting Literacy and Basic Skills in Ontario.

Literacy Service Planning:

- Consider the use of a provincial Literacy Service Planning (LSP) template for infographics – one that could be used to show LBS activity in each LSP area as well as a provincial roll up.
- Create blended learning case studies that can be shared and discussed at LSP meetings to facilitate referrals.
- Discuss blended learning at LSP meetings, where appropriate, as a means to address gaps in service.
- Explore how, if at all, technology can assist with service planning and coordination – to engage and connect, as well as to portray and analyze data.
- Consider the value of community calendars (that are shared electronically) that highlight short-term LBS courses, so that such programs can be referred to appropriately and maximized.
- Explore the use of Excel as a tool to further our ability to document and display data.
- Get reports on the most frequently accessed e-Channel courses and use this information in Literacy Service Planning.

Blended Learning:

- Develop a blended learning checklist to assist agencies in knowing when they are ready to support blended learning and what areas they may need to focus on. Pay attention to what needs to be in place for integrated blended learning and not just additional learning.
- Review the opportunities for literacy support organizations to further support blended learning.
- Consult with e-Channel providers to get their perspectives on blended learning and how to make it more effective for learners, programs and e-Channel providers.
- Develop some Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for blended learning.

Social Media:

- Develop a social media “footprint” among literacy support organizations in Ontario. How many individuals/organizations (followers) do the support organizations reach? Is there value in establishing this number and then working to increase it as part of a collaborative social marketing strategy?
- Most literacy support organizations curate social media content. Are there opportunities for identifying key messages, collaborating to generate content, and sharing it amongst the support organizations? Using individual social media accounts for curating and common accounts for generating?

- Discuss with MAESD the potential use of social media by literacy support organizations, as well as the real costs associated with having constant and impactful social media presences.
- Social media analytics – ensure all literacy support organizations have training in what can be tracked via social media, how to access this information, and how frequently it should be accessed.
- Connect the use of websites and social media to bibliotherapy – the clinical or non-clinical use of high quality fictional or non-fictional text to promote well-being.

Management:

- Document how the skills required to run a literacy support organization, particularly technological skills, has changed.
- Research how technology can assist literacy support organizations in maximizing their impact.

Collaboration:

- In some Ontario regions (North and East), regional networks are collaborating on the development of websites, social media, SurveyMonkey account costs, etc. Can other regions of the province benefit from this approach?
- Learning Networks of Ontario explore whether or not a single subscription to Venngage (or some other infographic site) is possible and/or desirable.

Communication:

- Consider the targeted generation and distribution of information (not just the information sent out via social media).
- Make better use of the expertise of Contact North and AlphaPlus.
- Some information is provincial in nature, while other information is regional in nature. Distinguish between the two via conversations between the Learning Networks of Ontario (LNO) and the Provincial Support Organizations for Literacy (PSOL).

Learning Management Platforms:

- Review the pros and cons of using a single learning management platform for the delivery of training offered by literacy support organizations.

Technology Management:

- Develop a template for literacy support organizations and programs to consider using for asset management/technological planning.

Research:

- Research how the definition of digital literacy has changed over the past 5-10 years. What does it mean for the work of literacy support organizations and how we support programs?

Best Practices:

- Technological skills are a discrete skill set. How can literacy support organizations support each other/mentor each other in this area?

Conclusion

Technology and the tools associated with technology have had a significant impact on Ontario's literacy support organizations. Technology can further support the work of literacy support organizations, but only if such organizations have the resources to purchase, learn about and integrate technology into their core activities.

Until this point, many literacy support organizations have depended upon projects to purchase and maintain technology such as webinar delivery programs, evaluation tools (like SurveyMonkey) and even the purchase of other basic hardware and software.

Even with the challenges, Ontario's literacy support organizations recognize the growing impact of technology upon the programs they serve and have shown a surprising ability to develop technological capacity to fulfill their mandates. With greater focus, support from capable organizations like Contact North and AlphaPlus, and recognition and funding from the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD), the support organizations can continue to evolve, innovate, and collaborate to use technology to its fullest to support the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program.