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Four technology trends for public procurement officials to watch in 2021

by Chris Penny, CEO and Co-Founder of Kinetic GPO

During the pandemic, we have seen significant changes in how municipalities use technology. As offices closed and workers began working from home, municipalities across the globe needed to adapt manual processes to digital ones, largely overnight.

This dramatic shift raised questions like how to transition to the cloud, what platform to use, whether to purchase technology through traditional bids or a GPO, and how to ensure cybersecurity for remote work. As municipalities found answers, they also found savings. For example, Tammy Moyses, procurement and supply chain manager for the City of Regina, saw \$30,000 in tangible savings from moving to online processes.

Now that it has been over a year since the pandemic began, municipalities are looking for further ways to use technology for greater efficiency and cost reduction. “At the outset of the pandemic, we saw three years of IT innovation in three months,” explains Puneet Duggal, field solutions

architect, networking at technology solutions provider at CDW Canada. “Now that entities are more comfortable with technology, they are looking for ways to optimize usage. Solutions providers need to meet customers wherever they are in their IT journey to help discover their needs, optimize existing infrastructure, and provide tailored solutions every step of the way.”

At this point, it is clear that we are not going back to the landscape of January 2020, and many technology trends are here to stay. Here are four that experts recommend keeping an eye on.

1. IT modernization and the cloud

When the pandemic began, municipal employees became remote workers and needed a real-time way to share information with each other as well as the people they serve. Entities had to decide whether to buy or rent software and which platforms to use. Employees also

needed training in order to become comfortable with new work processes.

“At that point, municipalities were in different stages of digital transformation, but the pandemic really accelerated those initiatives. Many entities began thinking about going through the digital transformation process, not just for IT, but for customer service and HR as well,” says Steve Hett, field account executive at CDW Canada.

Many municipalities knew the cloud was an option, but COVID-19 drove them to learn how to use it and adopt it efficiently. Once people became more comfortable with it, they began to see its many benefits, including the ability to deliver services efficiently over a network at low costs.

A simple example is the ability to access and collaborate on documents. Rather than emailing a document back and forth and assuming you are seeing the most updated version, the cloud enables

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collaborators to work on the document together and see real-time updates.

The cloud also facilitates low-cost data backups and fast testing of new applications. “Rather than backing up data to a hard drive with capacity limits, municipalities can back-up information to the cloud to simultaneously enhance operational efficiency and improve data security. Additionally, when applications tests and upgrades are needed, the cloud is able to facilitate this to determine the best course of action forward,” explains Matthew Edwards, senior manager of the public sector at CDW Canada.

Cloud solutions providers can also offer automated updates, eliminating the need for an IT department to install patches and upgrades. “This is a huge benefit, especially as employees continue working remotely,” says Gino Giampaolo, practice leader of digital transformation at CDW Canada. “Extending life cycle management to a solutions provider can be a great way to alleviate internal pressure or resource issues, as businesses and municipalities are able to focus on operational outcomes instead of IT maintenance.”

As entities began using technology like the cloud, they saw how IT is not a

cost, but rather a way to bring in more revenue by providing more and better services to citizens. Deploying the right cloud solution can optimize municipalities’ assets.

Moyses says, “We had begun moving to the cloud a year before the pandemic, so the transition was fairly seamless for us. Shifting from a manual to an online process helped us keep moving when everything shut down. We could still keep the work flowing and we saved a lot of time and money.”

Moving forward, public sector entities will continue using cloud services to remain resilient for future challenges. Gartner predicted a two-fold rise in the public sector’s rate of public cloud adoption, with a growth in spending of 17.7% annually through 2021. It could soon become rare to find any “non-cloud” IT environments, as migrating to the cloud has become a key growth avenue and an integral element to ensuring business continuity.





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Government organizations may look to enterprise identity and access management platforms to enhance security with tools like password management and two-factor authentication.

2. Securing remote work

In 2021, municipalities will continue the trend of remote workspaces. In addition to finding the right technology to support this work environment, municipalities must also implement the right cybersecurity measures to ensure there are no gaps in network security.

Tammy Rimes, executive director of the National Cooperative Procurement Partners (NCPP) and former purchasing director for the City of San Diego, points out that home Wi-Fi firewalls and passwords are not enough protection. “When employees work from home, an extra layer of security is needed, especially if they are dealing with confidential data or utility bills with client information.”

Duggal notes, “Cyber threats have been around for a long time, but in the past, hackers sat and waited. Now, we are seeing more attacks than ever. We are seeing bigger attacks. And we are sometimes seeing state-sponsored hackers. A big risk for municipalities is not being able to provide a government service like keeping the lights or heat on in town buildings or not being able to provide emergency services because of a security breach.”

Of course, the hardest question to answer is: How secure is secure enough?

Duggal recommends an assessment of current security frameworks to determine what else is needed and then building a layered approach. “You don’t just want a hard shell around your network, but also

layers of protection so that if a hacker does get in, they can’t go too far.”

Government organizations may look to enterprise identity and access management platforms to enhance security with tools like password management and two-factor authentication. However, these solutions must be able to encompass partners and contractors to protect against attacks at every level.

Moyses adds that training is also essential for cybersecurity. “Hackers have picked a vulnerable time to hack into systems, so training is important for all employees. We go through cyber security training every three to four months and it is mandatory.”

It may sound like a big undertaking, but municipalities do not need to take this on alone. There are resources available like CDW and GPOs to provide expertise and collaboration.

3. Merging physical and digital worlds

The Internet of Things (IoT) is fairly common in the federal government for surveillance purposes. However, experts predict the growth of cloud computing will merge with IoT to create opportunities to improve customer experience, drive efficiencies, and save taxpayers’ money.

Even small municipalities can take advantage of combining the physical and digital worlds. A good starting place, says Duggal, is an assessment of “mission critical” needs. “For smaller municipalities, this may involve fixing bottlenecks like broken links on a website or too many phone calls without enough people to support them. Look at what the website is used for and what those phone calls are about. It’s possible that a chat bot feature could solve those problems.”

Edwards notes that self-service is an increasing trend within IoT. “Citizens are used to the self-checkout feature on sites like Amazon, and municipalities can emulate that kind of environment by setting up self-service portals on the cloud. This leads to operational efficiency and makes it easier for citizens to interact



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with the city and for employees to get their jobs done.”

As for saving money and driving efficiency, sensors can be used for things like ensuring that the HVAC is working, predicting maintenance needs, locating open parking spots in public garages, and alerting citizens when a city bus is delayed.

Moyses notes that the City of Regina is looking at IoT projects related to tracking equipment with vehicle RFIDs, replacing old water meters with software options, and improving warehouse efficiency. “It is endless where we are going to create efficiencies when it comes to IoT involvement in the world,” she says.

4. Embracing group purchasing for technology needs

Group purchasing existed before the pandemic, but it became a game changer when towns needed to immediately obtain critical equipment like gloves, masks, and respirators. Locating scarce items took time, and towns were at the mercy of crisis pricing. However, municipalities that used GPOs could place orders through existing contracts at locked-in pricing.

Now, public sector entities are seeing the benefits of using GPOs for technology needs.

“GPOs are truly the future,” says Courtney Myers, manager of business development at CDW Canada. “Customers see the value of working with a large GPO to save time, money, and resources.”

Rimes points to several benefits of working with GPOs for technology needs. “First, large technology companies often have standard contracts with no room for negotiation. GPOs have already ensured that the terms and conditions are aligned with the tech company and the municipality. It is a huge time savings for procurement officers to have the negotiations already taken care of through a GPO,” she says.

Second, she notes that GPOs have already researched new technology. “Procurement officers know a little bit about a lot of stuff, but we don’t know a lot about everything. For example, when I bought lawn mowers for a Parks and Recreation Department, it was just

a lawn mower. But today, lawn mowers include computerized systems, specialized fuel requirements, and added safety features. There is always a learning curve for procurement teams to keep up with the latest technologies.”

She explains that while procurement officers often try to educate themselves about all of these items, as an additional resource they can turn to group purchasing to help do some of that leg work.

“You can’t be an expert on everything, and working with a trusted GPO supplier is a good way to get knowledgeable advice, especially when it comes to digital transformation where you want to make sure you have the right solutions and teams in place,” notes Hett.

“GPOs are also great ways to fill gaps in needs, because cooperative contracts include open-ended product listings that are constantly updated with new products and services with the advantage of locked-down pricing. If you solicit bids yourself, you will have gaps in the contracts as technology and new needs evolve. It’s better to start with a GPO to avoid those gaps and facilitate better pricing,” says Rimes, noting that a GPO speeds up the buying process from months to days.

Carl McDonald, director of contracting and compliance at Kinetic, notes that GPOs are helpful for purchasing IoT technology that is compliant and at a lower cost. He points to a recent e-vehicle project as an example. “Electric vehicle charging stations were not previously on our radar, but when a client reached out to us with an opportunity, we developed the specifications and documentation needed, worked with manufacturers for pricing, and got the required approvals. If there is something a public entity wants to do collaboratively, we will work to make that happen.”

Another benefit, says Rimes, is that it gives smaller entities the same buying power as provinces and large cities. “Some vendors and suppliers won’t respond to a small village’s request for proposals because the project is too small. However, the village can order the same products through a GPO and get the same pricing discounts as larger towns.”

As technology continues to change, the GPO model is exploding. For municipalities that have not yet considered cooperative purchasing, this is a good time to take a look at options. ❖





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Got broadband?

Five tips to bring fibre to your community

The pandemic has proved that the need for reliable, high-speed internet is more critical today than ever before. This is true whether it is to power small business or to better empower employees working from home.

But in Loveland, Colorado, this conversation started back in 2015 and resulted in the creation of Pulse. Loveland Pulse is the city's community owned, 100 percent fibre optic, broadband utility.

It is a story Lindsey Johansen knows quite well. Johansen is the communications and marketing manager for Loveland Pulse. She recently shared Loveland's experience at the Alliance of Innovation's Govapalooza conference.

"We were established in 2018, with our ground-breaking in November of 2019, and started our first customer connections in June of 2020," Johansen said. "We're currently under construction, connecting customers as we're going. But it'll take another two to three years to build out every home and business in Loveland."

Known as the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park, Loveland is some 45 minutes north of Denver. The city has a population of about 78,000 people and covers a land area of some 92 square kilometres or 35.5 square miles.

Journey to Connection Takes Time

Conversations around what became Loveland Pulse started during a 2015 city council retreat. During the retreat, several members expressed interest in exploring a municipal broadband option. But the path to connectivity was not an easy one.

Up first was overturning a prohibition against local communities providing telecommunications services. Next was two years of feasibility studies, surveys, analysis, and public outreach. Finally, after securing council approval, the team could begin work on Pulse.

Even so, broadband continued to be a contentious topic. This was due to a lot of community misinformation and

confusion around the project. This led to the 2018 launch of both the broadband project itself, and an aggressive education and an outreach campaign.

This is where communications specialist Brian Burke and his team came in, working to support Loveland on the front lines. Together, they brought greater clarity to Loveland residents. They also created confidence in what broadband would mean for the community.

"No process that anybody's going to go through is going to be perfect. But at the core of this is making sure that you are reaching out to your community," Burke said, also speaking at the Govapalooza event. "People can pick up a lot of lessons. This is exploring those five crucial tips to make sure that you have smoother process."

Five Tips to Broadband Connectivity

Johansen and Burke shared the following five tips for bringing broadband

connectivity to a community, based on Loveland's experience.

1. Find the need

"Let's talk about who really needs this cost-effective, fast internet. Essentially everybody, right. But I think it's trying to get a little bit more specific on who we're really trying to target," Johansen said. "This past year has really shown the legitimacy of having broadband available within your community."

There are many underserved populations in any community. There are people of lower incomes who can't afford service. There are people who don't even internet access right now; or if they do, it could be via slow-speed dial up. Who needs access to a high-speed connection? For home-based businesses, as an example, it is a must. This is particularly true in Loveland, where upward of 75 percent of businesses fall into this category.

High speeds are important, and fibre brings that. Fair access is also important to a competitive market. Setting up a reliable broadband fibre network within your community provides people with

There are many underserved populations in any community. There are people of lower incomes who can't afford service. There are people who don't even internet access right now; or if they do, it could be via slow-speed dial up.

a choice. It's better than having one monopoly offering internet and that's it.

Economic development is a big reason for high-speed reliability. When talking about business retention, expansion, and attraction, a reliable high-speed network is often a deal-breaker.

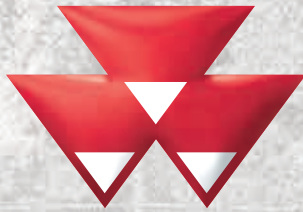
2. Get buy-in

"You can't do this all alone," Johansen said. "Get buy-in from all corners of your

community and foster that relationship throughout the entire process."

Johansen suggests starting with city council, but also working with the administration. This can lead to a broadband team charged with investigating the viability of the utility within the community. The next thing is to find the "local fibre cheerleaders." These include grassroots organizations or groups of interested residents. These people are





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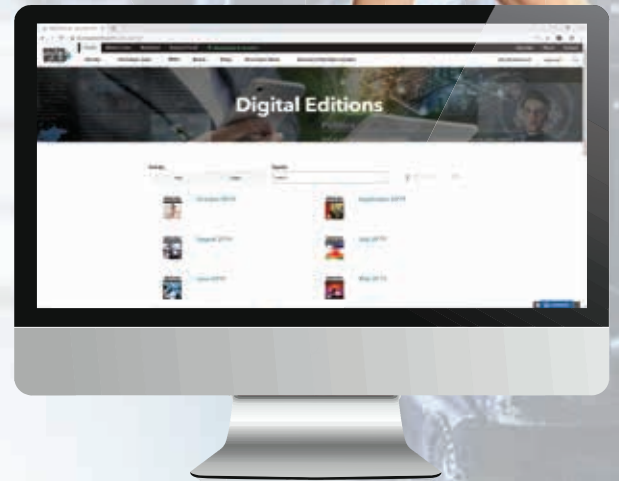


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As the community evolves, grows, and becomes more communicative on a nationwide and global basis, there is a growing need to connect. And as such, reliable high-speed internet should be a basic utility.

essential in rallying support and providing advice. They can act as a sounding board, and help guide the public participation and local outreach process.

Burke also poised the question: “Why don’t some communities have reliable internet in the first place?” It’s often because the cable provider in the area determined there wasn’t a strong ROI in installing it. This could be because of small populations or remote locations.

As the community evolves, grows, and becomes more communicative on a nationwide and global basis, there is a growing need to connect. And as such, reliable high-speed internet should be a basic utility. That’s why it is important to reach out to those underrepresented, underserved members of the community and offer them an alternative.

3. Tell the story of why

“The other piece of it is when we tell the story of why everybody deserves equal access, why they deserve equal speed,” Johansen said. “Whatever income level, wherever you live, it’s really important to talk about how it should be more fair.”

Look at a small business that is looking to have fibre, and one who already has it. It will cost thousands of dollars for individuals to install fibre. But when there is a utility or a municipality providing it, there’s often a subsidy program to help trim the cost.

It’s also important for businesses to have a fair contract. They need to know that what they are paying one month is going

to be the same the next. In addition, it’s important to recognize that a municipality is not there “to try to make a buck off of the internet.” Instead, they are looking to form partnerships that lead to affordable and accessible local internet.

Johansen pointed to an example of a small business that is currently without access to a high-speed fibre network but wants to install one. They will soon see that it might cost thousands of dollars to install fibre within their office. It’s

not like getting internet cable, where it may cost \$100. It costs quite a bit. Also, when a municipality provides the service, there’s usually a program offered to install fibre leading up to a given building or home.

4. Share what makes you unique

“You need to do your market research and understand what makes your internet unique within your area,” Johansen said. “A huge selling point for Pulse: we may not be the lowest price option every single time, but we’ll win on customer service every single time.”

The uniqueness in Loveland, Johansen said, is centred on accentuating the local nature of the utility. Johansen said it can’t be emphasized enough that Loveland Pulse is 100 percent local. This means more local jobs. It’s money spent on services will stay local. That money is then reinvested back into the Pulse network, not some nationwide counterpart. Also, when it comes to technical support and customer service, it is someone’s neighbour, friend, or family member on the other end of the phone.

The other thing that the municipality needs to do is the necessary market research. This is key for understanding



what makes the area's needs unique. In Loveland specifically, the choice was made to stress the public utility aspect of the initiative. There could be an argument that the municipality doesn't have the technical expertise to create such a service. The response can be almost immediate. In all actuality, the municipality has considerable experience in utilities. For example, it provides electricity, water, wastewater, and stormwater. As such, the municipality is shown as a credible source of expertise.

5. Don't stop talking

"It's essential to not stop talking from the very beginning until the very end," Burke said. "Make sure right in the beginning that you are again pulling in all those stakeholders, but also doing a lot of community outreach. Make sure that you're communicating with them. And that you're sharing the brand and you're sharing that consistent messaging."

Burke said the launch of a new fibre network will generate considerable conversation from the start. People are going to be asking serious questions. But it is important to remember that, even when immediate answers are not always possible, talking with the community is essential. Burke added that there will be a lot of public fanfare about the launch of the broadband network. As such, staff must get out

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into the community, show up at public events, and enthusiastically continue the conversation.

It's important, Johansen said, to properly brand your utility. You need to create a brand that is not too techy. It must be understandable to the masses. It can't be too intimidating for the casual user. The utility needs to be approachable. Constant communication with council members is important. So too is talking with staying in touch with the wider municipal organization. This is key so that everybody within the organization, and the public as well, is on the same page.

Get Ready for the Wild Ride

Burke said there will be "lots of fits and starts and hurdles and whatnot" when launching a local broadband network. This is a point that Johansen said she can't stress enough.

"Now that we're green-lighted and we're moving forward, we have to keep going. When your council changes over, you've got to continue to educate, bring those advocates on board, because it's a long process," she said. "It's a three- to four-year construction project for us. And so we have to continue to update our community and keep them on board throughout that entire time." **MW**

— Sean Meyer, *Municipal World*





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