# *Bridging the Digital Divide:*

## a presentation to the

# Premier's Technology Council

## by the

# British Columbia Library Association

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Thank you for allowing the British Columbia Library Association the opportunity to share with the Premier's Technology Council our vision of the role that libraries, and library associations, can play in bridging the digital divide.

Founded in 1911, and incorporated in 1948, the British Columbia Library Association (BCLA) is a non-profit, independent, voluntary association. Our membership includes over 700 librarians, library employees, library trustees and publishers, as well as public, academic, corporate, government, school, and other libraries. Our association works to encourage library development and to promote the mutual interests of library users and libraries through education, research, and cooperative efforts.

Introduction

The libraries of British Columbia have been at the forefront in the drive to ensure that the residents of this province are well prepared for the "Information Age".  British Columbia was the first province to provide public access to the Internet in all public libraries.

Public libraries enhance the lives of all British Columbians, and are instrumental to the economic well-being of the communities they serve.  An informed and literate public is key to B.C.'s economic health.  Public libraries are well positioned to provide the services that help to ensure that the province continues to grow and prosper, and are key in ensuring that residents have access to new technologies, regardless of that resident's economic status.

The Digital Economy

On-line, digital interactions are the driving force of the new economy. The Internet is not just a network of connected computers, but a vehicle for a new market economy -- one that is global, continuously operating and increasingly automating the process of buying, selling, and distributing. Cyberspace is not a solid structure located in a certain place, but a collection of digital technologies that creates an increasingly believable illusion of place. In the new digital economy, smaller firms will be tied together, not by ownership & bureaucracy, but by bandwidth data and communications links.

Time, distance and organizational barriers between people are being eliminated, organizational structures are becoming flatter and eCommerce is altering economic value chains and creating new business models. The buzzwords in the new economy are speed, connectivity and adaptability. [i]

To be competitive in the knowledge-based economy, British Columbians are going to need access to the tools that will insure that they are able to develop requisite skills. Libraries are a trusted, recognized, community asset. Statistics show that across Canada, there are over 150 million trips to libraries annually – more than to all other cultural and sporting events combined. Over 2/3 of all Canadians consider themselves active library users

To be successful, British Columbia will need to ensure that its citizens have access to the Internet in their communities. The development of a high-speed, broadband network has been compared to the building of the national railway. Such an impact is not hyperbole. In the case of broadband services, however, the "stations" are already built. We call them libraries.

Libraries are an integral part of a communities learning system. Libraries,  through their buildings, networks, human resources and materials provide cultural and leisure

facilities. They also have an important role to play in economic regeneration through support for small and medium sized businesses by providing access to knowledge, resources and training opportunities. The need for knowledge in business has been made more critical by the advent of e-commerce. Libraries have been at the forefront of making this knowledge available to all, regardless of a person's financial status.

Government policy has recognised the role of libraries for their support on the wider lifelong learning agenda. By offering opportunities and access to learning, they support the skilling of citizens that in turn supports economic development. Through their business information services, libraries offer business information support. Many, such as Vancouver Public Library, have developed specialist business resources to support local business.

Libraries have traditionally also met the needs of job seekers and those upgrading their skills by offering access to information on careers advice, training opportunities, jobs available, company information and how to write CVs and attend interviews. In some areas job clubs meet in the library building with immediate access and support to information required, as well as access to PCs. The public libraries in Surrey and Richmond, among others, offer labour market training to jobseekers. A major component of this training is instruction in "internet literacy". The Burnaby Public Library has developed a partnership with the Burnaby School Board to provide a computer lab open to the public.

Research has shown that the economic impact of libraries is evidenced in four major ways:

- Providing access to information for people in business and self employed people. As the small business sector is growing, the number of business requiring information will increase. Access to reliable information enhances businesses' competitive edge

- Contributing to people's skills, confidence and employability

- Supporting job-seekers by offering information and research facilities

- Supporting economic regeneration in local communities

Libraries have provided this service at a very low cost to the communities they serve.

The British Columbia Library Association

The British Columbia Library Association has worked extensively with the Public Library Services Branch to ensure that libraries throughout the province have the tools necessary to deliver services that help to bridge the digital divide:

- OutLook OnLine - providing Internet access to the holdings of public and academic libraries, facilitating information sharing across the province.

- Youth@BC - providing the duel benefits of ensuring young British Columbians have access to summer employment, and also that the communities they serve have access to Internet training.

- Communities Connect - grants to develop electronic content for the Internet
- Online Databases – providing economies of scale in licensing databases such as Canadian Business and Current Affairs, which ensures that all citizens of the province, regardless of where they live, have access to these tools through their public library.
- Train the Trainers – providing Internet training for library staff, so that they may in turn develop training programs in their communities.
- Continuing Education and Annual Conference – providing ongoing training and upgrading of skills for BCLA members, who in turn bring that knowledge to their communities.
- First Nations Interest Group – has provided library training through the First Nations Summer Institute as well as ongoing sessions.

British Columbia's Libraries

Library usage among British Columbians is at an all time high. The 1999 Public Library Statistics show that 98% of the province is served by public libraries. Whether you live in the Lower Mainland, in Alert Bay or in Tumbler Ridge, you have access to the wealth of information contained in B.C.'s public libraries.

In 1999:

46,445,256 items were borrowed from public libraries in British Columbia, providing (nearly 12 items for every person in BC):

- marketing strategies for new businesses
- labour market information for the unemployed
- contact information for business people

4,113,990 reference questions were answered, such as:

- how can I get started on a home business?
- I am on assistance and need to upgrade my skills. What programs are available?

650,897 British Columbians attended a total of 20,488 library programs, including:

- Internet Training
- information for new immigrants eager to integrate into British Columbia society
- labour market skills for job seekers
- tax seminars in English, Mandarin, and Punjabi

1,264 computers and terminals provided online catalogues, computer software, and Internet access allowing:

- individuals in remote locations access to specialized materials
- small businesses to take advantage of sophisticated software programs
- resume writers the use of the latest word processing software

British Columbia's libraries are convenient access point for those using the Internet:

- In 1999, BC's public libraries provided 8235 hours of service each week
- Many libraries now provide remote access to their catalogues and databases

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[i] "The Digital Divide": US Small Business Administration,
www.sba.gov/classroom/digitaldivide.html