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## Watch Out, Corporates: Canada's Charitable Sector, Once Reluctant to Embrace Digital Transformation, is Now Competing for its Share of Eyeball Time

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At the end of 2019, the San Francisco-based tech giant Salesforce invited more than 5,500 non-profit professionals to attend more than 300 sessions focused specifically on the sector at its annual mega-conference: Dreamforce.

It might be Salesforce's ideal market. For one thing, it's enormous, making up 8.5% of Canada's GDP and employing more than two million Canadians, according to Imagine Canada. The sector's organizations also demand a wide range of digital services to manage networks of donors, volunteers, employees, service providers, and clients. Finally, the market lines up perfectly with Salesforce's shift towards social responsibility, and specifically the alignment of its business model with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

They aren't alone in this shift. Behemoths like Google and Microsoft offer products, services, and expertise at a reduced rate to non-profits for financial benefit, employee engagement, and improved public perception. But this union isn't just a story about Silicon Valley's cunning and strategic foresight, or its efforts to give back. The increasing presence of non-profit professionals at conferences like Dreamforce, and in tech circles generally, appears also to signal that the sector is becoming more intentional, whether through necessity or vision, about learning and leveraging the best tech solutions on the market.

The COVID-19 pandemic has in many ways expedited this pivot, as charities move their

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operations online and look to serve their communities and tell their stories using virtual tools.

One organization in attendance at Dreamforce was Canadian charity Furniture Bank, which collects gently used household items and distributes them to families in need. It's an example of an organization that improved its digital capabilities through actively engaging with tech companies. Its partnership with Salesforce started when the organization's leadership team was looking to move their mostly paper-based system online as they expanded. They applied to, and were approved for, Salesforce's Power of Us program, which provides 10 free licences to non-profits. More importantly, they worked with Salesforce to learn the best ways for their organization to use its software, from managing donors, to coordinating donation pickups, to managing inventory.

"As a sector, we don't talk about this component of the organization that much. Systems, tech, leveraging it for change — it can get really lonely," said Dan Kershaw, Furniture Bank's executive director. "There are lots of conversations around new products and features, but in terms of robust conversations on how to leverage a platform, there isn't much."

The charity has also considered technology in terms of scaling, a term seldom used, and in some cases disparaged, in the sector. "It's important for any non-profit to figure out how big they need to be to solve the problem they're looking to solve, similar to the total addressable market in the business world," said Kershaw.

Though he struggled to name other non-profits he sees as digital leaders, Kershaw did point to Pathways to Education, a charity whose aim is to reduce dropout rates across Canada. Its director of digital strategy and transformation, Jason Shim, has become a leader in the non-profit tech space. He's the board chair of NTEN, a US-based organization that supports non-profit tech professionals, and the editor of *Ledger*, a scholarly journal that publishes the latest research about cryptocurrency and blockchain.

For Shim, it's crucial that non-profits view their digital presence not just in the context of the non-profit sector, but in the context of the internet as a whole. He says awareness is Pathways' biggest challenge in the millennial market.

"There's a competitive market for attention," Shim said, adding, "We're competing with anyone else seeking eyeball time. Our message has to cut through everything being posted on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat."

Social media isn't the only way Pathways is meeting high school students where they are. Part of its digital strategy, according to Shim, has been finding tools to send out mass SMS messages to communicate programming changes, and connecting its 20 locations through a national database.

"We collect lots of data from students and [we] were essentially using spreadsheets," he said. "Moving to a database freed up a lot of time, and we're looking to continue that trend with machine learning and automation tools."

Like Kershaw with Furniture Bank, Shim sees private-sector collaboration as crucial to Pathways' growth. He also views these engagements as mutually beneficial.

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“There’s lots of room for interesting corporate partnerships, some in the form of in-kind donations,” he said. “There are private-sector employees who want to help on a long-term basis, too, and not just for a one-day hackathon. We want to take a thoughtful, integrated approach. We need resources to learn technology, too, through partnering with the private sector.”

These types of partnerships seem to have been crucial in the digital transformation at several non-profits, but Jesse Hayman, vice president of Jack.org, doesn’t see them as a necessity for digital transformation.

The organization, which trains and empowers young leaders to “revolutionize mental health,” had to evolve digitally to keep pace with its growth. It went from exclusively in-person events to building a peer-to-peer network and mental health education platform, and from having no communications team to taking a comms-first approach with a focus on video.

“We needed to blow this up, and get young people involved in a big way,” Hayman said.

Like Furniture Bank and Pathways to Education, Jack.org aspired to rival both for-profit and non-profit leaders in the digital space. One of those was Nike, which Hayman saw as a model for storytelling and audience engagement.

These aspirations — not tech partnerships — led donors to trust that Jack.org, an organization that began with little to no technical expertise, could build a platform that its team hoped would be accessed by 10,000-plus unique users each month. In the end, they reached 20,000 in the first two weeks of using their new platform.

With that transition, they’ve acquired data on engagement, demographics, and impact that their team can use to determine what to build next. They’re also not forcing their audience to visit Jack.org, distributing their content across YouTube and social media.

“We engage a quarter of young people in digital resources alone,” Hayman said. “We still want the in-person talks, but it’s not realistic to host more than a thousand of them.

“People will watch a video before they even get to the website. We can deliver significant education to millions instead of a couple hundred thousand. It’s fully transformed the way we work and given us real connection to young people.”

Hayman said he admires other groups such as Wealthsimple, Movember, Kids Help Phone, and The Born This Way Foundation (singer Lady Gaga’s charity), all of which have mastered digital storytelling. “You need to build comms into your ethos, and you’ll naturally go digital. If you’re not doing it, you’re missing out.”

Kershaw, Shim, and Hayman all emphasized the perspective that non-profits can no longer play by non-profit-ordained rules when it comes to competing on the digital stage. They’re competing on the same channels as for-profits, and therefore need to measure themselves against the entire market.

“Most non-profits need to get confident that this is the reality,” Kershaw said. “We should all be clear on what our goals are.”

