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B.C.'S NEWS AND VIEWS  
FROM INDUSTRY SECTORS

02/14

CULTURE

## Live Wire

The City of Vancouver's digital strategy is in full swing, its chief digital officer is in place and next up is a half-million-dollar digital lab for the main library

by Kristen Hilderman

**T**he screech of a 1990s dial-up tone is a grating reminder of how taxing it used to be to simply connect to the Internet. These days most of us carry that silent, super-fast connective power in our pocket wherever we go.

But not everyone enjoys the privilege of digital fluency and access. In fact, the administration of B.C.'s largest city is struggling to break free from an earlier digital era.

"The platform on which all city services rest is from 1991," says Vancouver city councillor Andrea Reimer, sounding equally exasperated and amused. The City has been working on launching a cohesive digital strategy—which includes upgrading software—since 2009, and it was approved last April. "The library has been the group within the city that led the digital strategy development," Reimer says. "That's a reflection of how much further ahead they are in this space." The strategy was initiated by Vancouver Public Library chief librarian Sandra Singh and included consultation with the community and an external advisory committee that included leaders in the digital space. Singh is now applying similar principles at the main library with the development of the Inspiration Lab, a free digital hub for residents and →

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140 beers on tap, 450 seats: who says Vancouver doesn't know how to have fun?



### DIGITAL CITY

Chief librarian Sandra Singh was the driving force behind Vancouver's digital strategy.

## Number of Wi-Fi Sessions at VPL (downtown location)

2009  178,000

2012  590,000

SOURCE: Vancouver Public Library

creative entrepreneurs, due to open this fall.

Ancient platform aside, Reimer points out that Vancouver is the only Canadian city with a public digital strategy, and is not far behind leaders such as New York, Boston and London. "There's a certain pride that comes with innovating new policy areas," she says. The City's goals are to improve—and digitize—the delivery of high-demand services, provide increased access to technology for residents and support growth in the technology sector to bolster Vancouver's digital economy.

In September, Jessie Adcock joined the City of Vancouver as its inaugural chief digital officer, with the mandate of executing and overseeing the City's digital strategy. "I think digital technology is transforming the way we operate. It creates new expectations for businesses and for engagement between businesses, citizens and government," says Adcock. "In partnership with the Vancouver Economic Commission, we're looking at different types of programs—partner programs, proof-of-concept programs, incubator programs for digital companies. We're also looking internally within the City to create a favourable regulatory framework and environment that supports the digital industry specifically."

Where the City's strategy aims to support Vancouver's digital economy, the VPL wants its new project—the 3,000-square-foot lab on the main branch's third floor—to fuel the city's creative economy and act as an incubator for burgeoning creative professionals. The Inspiration Lab reflects the City's digital-strategy goals: align city services with the way businesses and residents currently function in a digital world, while addressing the digital divide and increasing access to creative software and technology for residents who don't have it at home. The VPL Foundation is raising the majority of the \$500,000 estimated cost, and Singh hopes to also access a grant through the City's Innovation Fund.

The VPL's central branch is Wi-Fi-enabled and already has the hallmarks of a modern library, but to be a hub for Vancouver's creative sector it needs more than just comput-

ers and ebooks. "I see it as a natural extension of the library's provision of public technology to move into providing access to creative technologies that go beyond Word and PowerPoint," Singh says. The new lab will include self-publishing support to create ebooks and print books, digitization tools to convert old media, video-editing software and workstations, and a digital recording studio and sound-mixing equipment. "One of the things that we heard through the City's digital-strategy consultation was that there's a real need to develop local talent and to engage local talent," Singh says. "What we're hoping is that the Inspiration Lab could be a bit of an incubator."

The foundation has received votes of confidence from the business community in the form of support for its "Touch 2013" fundraising event and participation on the lab's advisory committee. "They're having really good traction in getting

some digital leaders into that advisory committee," says Singh, adding that because it is still being formed, she cannot yet share names. However, some big names graced the silent-auction list at the October fundraising event, which offered winning bidders an hour with influential Vancouverites, featuring sessions with Pixar's Amir Nasrabadi, Bob Rennie, SAP Canada Inc.'s Kirsten Sutton and Francesco Aquilini of the Vancouver Canucks.

B.C. Technology Industry Association president and CEO Bill Tam is an advocate of both the City's strategy and the VPL's lab; he consulted with the City on its digital strategy, and the BCTIA was a supporting sponsor for the VPL

fundraiser. According to Tam, the digital strategy "cements the leadership position that we're aspiring to have on a worldwide stage, capitalizes on the fact that we're probably one of the top startup ecosystems for digital technologies and for startups in general, and allows us to propel that forward momentum into a better economic situation."

Both initiatives strive to empower residents, and by extension beef up the digital and creative economies. Singh sees it as a natural step for the VPL. "We've always kind of provided that outlet for creativity in an analog world. Now it's just taking that next step in creating the platform in a digital world." □



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