



Guest Editorial

In Health ICT Adoption Means EHR

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Each year around this time the ITAC Board convenes to set priorities and guide our workplan for the 12 months ahead. For the past three years now, our overarching theme has been “ICT – The Engine of Growth for Canada.” This thematic link binds all the public policy work that ITAC does to an overarching vision of a more richly ICT-enabled economy and society in Canada.

A key thrust of our work is illustrating the strong connection between investment in ICT and macroeconomic and societal improvement. We have promoted the fact that ICT investment drives productivity improvement and now this notion is accepted widely by economists and public policy makers throughout Canada and elsewhere. Nevertheless the Canadian adoption of ICTs lags that of other competing jurisdictions, notably the United States. Currently, the ICT investment per worker in Canada is just slightly more than half that in the United States. This is an obvious and unacceptable drain on Canada’s productivity and prosperity. Improving this performance is a key objective for much of ITAC’s advocacy and the focus of at least three key committees.

The recognition of the importance of ICT goes beyond the issues of productivity. In September, the first comprehensive assessment of Canada’s science and technology strengths recognized ICT as a principal Canadian industrial and research strength. Later that month the ITAC Board was hosted in Halifax by Premier MacDonald, who publicly stressed the importance of the ICT sector to his economic vision for the province. And most recently, the Ontario Government has released a blueprint for the creation of a strong knowledge-based economy that reflects much of what we have recommended.

It appears that in our aim to stress the importance of the ICT sector as both an economic force and as an enabler of economic growth ITAC can report some success on the fundamentals. In spite of our success, there remain some glaring gaps. The under-use of ICTs is perhaps the most notable. When it comes to ICT in healthcare, we find a very similar picture

Canada’s healthcare system is one of its most prized assets. If it performs well, it is a societal and competitive advantage. If it doesn’t, it turns into a disadvantage. Because of our chronic under-investment in ICTs for the healthcare sector, we know it is not as good as it could be. We know that a wiser and more efficient use of ICTs will improve patient outcomes, reduce wait times as well as prevent unnecessary illness and death. And on top of all of these benefits, increasing the use of ICTs will help contain the costs of an institution Canadians are wondering if they can afford. ICT adoption in health is in our interest as employers, as taxpayers and as the industrial sector responsible for ICT-driven innovation.

In the healthcare sector, a growing chorus of voices is signalling that e-health is key to the system’s future. The cornerstone of e-health, of course, is the electronic health record. EHR’s benefits are so numerous as to leave the laggard pace of adoption a source of bewilderment. They include everything from cost-effectiveness to shorter wait times to patient safety.

There are some signs that the laggard pace is improving. The EHR is becoming a reality in some jurisdictions, notably Alberta, Newfoundland, British Columbia and Quebec. But there is still a great deal to do to advance adoption across the country. This will be the major focus of CHITTA’s work – through its advocacy committee, through its work on standards and in the various other dimensions of e-health throughout 2007. ●