

NW Georgia Digital Economy Plan executive input analysis

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Background

This is an interim report on digital economy planning for Northwest Georgia Regional Commission. During the fall of 2013 the Regional Commission, with assistance from Greg Laudeman Consulting (GLC), conducted a series of “executive sessions” to establish priorities for the plan, and to identify issues the plan should address. The plan’s purpose is to grow local businesses, recruit and retain industry, and support local and regional institutions with technology. This should increase employment and household earnings as it supports improved organizational performance.

Participants for the executive sessions were recruited via chambers of commerce, development authorities, and local governments. Some non-responding entities were targeted for individual discussions to assure that there was not a bias toward technology (e.g., participation only by those who see technology as important).

We specifically asked for participation from top officials and not technologists based on the idea that digital technologies are means to ends. We wanted to know about those ends, about what is important or problematic, and about what organizations across the region are trying to accomplish with digital technologies. In each session, we asked about these topics:

- Overall goals or issues
- Meaning of the term “digital economy”
- Approach to the digital economy
- Barriers to using digital technology
- What could be done at the regional level to boost the use and value of digital technologies

Data was gathered via input forms completed by participants during the discussion and participant discussion notes captured by the meeting facilitator. Major themes in the data were identified, and comments from the input forms and discussion notes were categorized by these themes.

- Access to digital services & technologies, digital infrastructure
- Funding and resources for digital technologies
- Impacts and uses of digital technologies
- Awareness & know-how about/for digital technologies
- Recruiting industry
- Socioeconomic issues
- General strategy, how to deploy resources
- Workforce

All comments touched on at least one of these themes; some comments fell into multiple categories.

Findings

Based on inputs from executive session participants, the northwest Georgia Digital Economy Plan should focus on increasing awareness and know-how about digital technologies. This involves increasing citizens' comfort level with and educating them about the value of digital technology, as well as developing greater technological expertise and promoting best practices.

Facilitating greater access and infrastructure development is also an important priority. Participants showed strong support for cross-jurisdiction/sector collaboration and a regional strategy for the digital economy. Participants' comments suggest that the focus and success of access & infrastructure and strategy depend on the success of efforts to increase awareness & know-how.

Funding & resources is a critical issue for the Digital Economy Plan to address. While participants did not mention it as something that could be addressed on a regional level, they did cite it—overwhelmingly—as a barrier growth of the digital economy. It is linked to the issue of awareness & know-how. Limited awareness undermines support for spending on digital technologies and on ability to develop technological resources. Where there is an appreciation for the benefits of digital technology, limited funding & resources keeps leaders from getting those benefits.

There appears to be some disconnect between goals and approach regarding workforce. Workforce development was expressed as a top goal, and know-how was clearly a barrier and a top priority for participants, yet workforce (and know-how, to a lesser extent) is not being addressed in most participants' approach to the digital economy. This may relate back to limited funding for training & development, and to limited awareness of the digital economy's importance. It may be that this issue has simply been ceded to educational institutions and left to individuals, or that digital technologies have become so integrated into business operations that workforce is not considered as a separate theme.

At very least, the regional Digital Economy Plan should include additional consideration about how training & development is being incorporated in approaches to the digital economy. Information about how digital technology is changing the nature of work and how it is impacting the workforce should be part of awareness-building. Funding for training & development should be included in any efforts to increase availability or reduce cost of technological resources. The plan should include innovative approaches to workforce development, particularly those that capitalize on digital technologies and develop basic technological skills for a broad range and large number of the region's citizens.

Goals

The major theme for goals was impacts & uses (29% of comments), followed closely by concerns about socioeconomic issues and workforce development. 24% of comments mentioned socioeconomic issues. 24% included workforce development as a goal, and 10% mentioned awareness & know-how. Only 1 comments on an input forms specifically included training employees in digital technologies as a goal. The general concern was how to simultaneously improve customer value and

reduce costs. Participants generally felt that digital technologies are critical to this endeavor but also expressed concerns about negative socioeconomic impacts. Exactly what this means varied by the type of participant. Engagement was a general theme that ran through many comments about goals: How to reach, mobilize, and inform stakeholders.

21% mentioned citizen or industry recruitment. Chambers of commerce, development authorities, and local governments saw impact in terms of attracting business investment, tourists, and new young professional residents. Most of these comments were linked to access & infrastructure goals, such as deploying wi-fi in a downtown area. These organizations also expressed desire to make it easier for citizens/members to interact with them. Digital access & infrastructure were mentioned in 23% of comments, while funding was mentioned in 5% of comments about goals.

Educators had similar goals, but were even more concerned about providing access to information for students and their parents. Educators were particularly interested in equitably meeting demand for access for all students and their families. Chambers and educators both expressed the goal of keeping their stakeholders up-to-date with technology.

Businesses, industry, public safety, and utilities tended to express goals in terms of business outcomes, such as launching new product lines, cutting down on paper-based information, or conducting particular business activities online.

Meaning of “digital economy”

Participants were asked about the meaning of the term “digital economy” to understand leaders’ understandings of how digital technologies fit into and impact the region.

69% of comments mentioned something about impacts & utilization. Local governments, educational institutions, healthcare, and professionals stressed access to information. Utilities focused on digital technology as a means of monitoring and controlling their infrastructure. Social services had similar views but tended to minimize digital technologies’ meaning in their sector.

Most chamber executives understood that digital technologies are profoundly impacting their members and how the chamber does business. Digital technologies were cited as critical for efficiency and competitiveness, especially for communications and marketing. That said, approximately half of the chamber executives who were invited did not participate in the executive session. We made extra effort to interview a non-responding chamber executive, who said, “I don’t think [the digital economy] means anything to me or the chamber.”

Chamber executives seem to be representative of leaders: Their understanding of what the digital economy means is quite varied. Some see it as critical for their communities; others think it has no meaning. Most are unsure. 18% of comments mentioned strategy and 16% addressed socioeconomic issues. These comments evenly raised two concerns, (1) citizens don’t understand or support investment in

the technology, and (2) communities and tax bases will decline without pervasive investment in and use of digital technology.

Development authority representatives and some government representatives focused on “digital economy” as a means or opportunity to attract business and talent. 19% of comments mentioned access & infrastructure.

While 14% of comments about the meaning of the digital economy mentioned awareness & know-how, only 5% contained something about workforce. Most of these were general. Participants expressed certainty that the digital economy means something big for workforce along with uncertainty about exactly what. Leaders are clearly looking for a way to address this uncertainty. Industry participants expressed the meaning of the digital economy in very clear and simple terms: web developers, software programmers, and network technicians.

Approach

What are executives doing about the digital economy, and how are they leading their organizations into it? Here again the vast majority of comments, 60%, focused on impacts & utilization. Most participants identified multiple applications their organizations were deploying and using. Often these were coupled with comments about strategy, which were evenly divided between (a) “embracing it” and (b) “slowly.” Generally, the emphasis was on providing customers, employees, or other stakeholders with information.

Interestingly, awareness & know-how, which was mentioned in 15% of the comments, and, to a less extent, access & infrastructure (16%) and funding (13%), were not mentioned in conjunction with impacts & utilization. Socioeconomic issues were only mentioned in 8% of the comments about approach, and recruiting and workforce were both themes in 7% of comments about this topic.

Barriers

The vast majority of comments identified funding (53%) and awareness & know-how (49%) as barriers. 30% of comments included both of these themes. Often these comments were put in terms of “keeping up” and understanding benefits of digital technology. Local governments and educational institutions were especially stymied by lack of funds, which the often related to stakeholders’ limited awareness & know-how. Standards (or lack thereof) was a specific concern mentioned by a variety of participants.

Impacts & utilization was noted as a barrier in 16% of comments, particularly where participants had stakeholders who were uncertain about the value of digital technology. Socioeconomic issues, particularly regarding ethical uses, privacy, and subsidizing high-cost users, were mentioned in 15% of comments. Workforce was mentioned as a barrier in 13% of comments. Recruitment was a theme in 9% of comments on this topic.

Region

What could or should be done at the regional level was really the primary concern that the executive sessions were convened to address. 50% of comments identified

awareness & know-how, particularly convening discussion similar to the executive sessions and helping leaders understand the value of technology (and communicate that value to stakeholders). Many of these comments, particularly from chambers of commerce and local governments, called for regional efforts to identify resources and effective technology solutions. Collaboration and information sharing were both mentioned as part of this theme for this topic.

Access & infrastructure and strategy were each themes in 25% of comments. Access & infrastructure were often expressed in terms of expanded broadband coverage, so that all citizens had baseline access, fiber-based telecom infrastructure in industrial areas, and free-to-users wi-fi in downtown areas. Most of the strategy comments focused on collaboration across jurisdictions, but many also express a concern with the region’s image. Participants clearly saw an opportunity to promote the region’s abundant infrastructure and change backward stereotyping. These comments tend to be linked with changing citizens’ attitudes toward technology, too.

Impacts & utilization was a theme in 13% of comments, and was often linked to addressing possible negative impacts and helping those who aren’t getting positive impacts. Local governments’ comments suggested that they were limited in their ability to realize benefits because lack of support and understanding by a small but vocal contingent of citizens. Generally, these comments related back to the overarching theme of engagement & involvement: Many stakeholders are disengaged and uninvolved.

11% of comments included funding as a theme. These tended to be either very simple comments, such as “more affordable,” or focused on the challenges of selecting and supporting digital technologies.

Socioeconomic issues and workforce were themes in 7% of comments on this topic. These were linked with issues of awareness & know-how.

Executive input participants by type

Type	Participants
Chamber of Commerce	8
City	14
County	15
Education	9
Healthcare	2
Industry	3
Professional services	3
Emergency services	2
Recreation/tourism	1
Retail	1
Social services	3
State elected official	1
Technology	6
Utilities	3

For more information

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