

# These Tech Companies Want To Bring Digital Equity To First Nations In Canada

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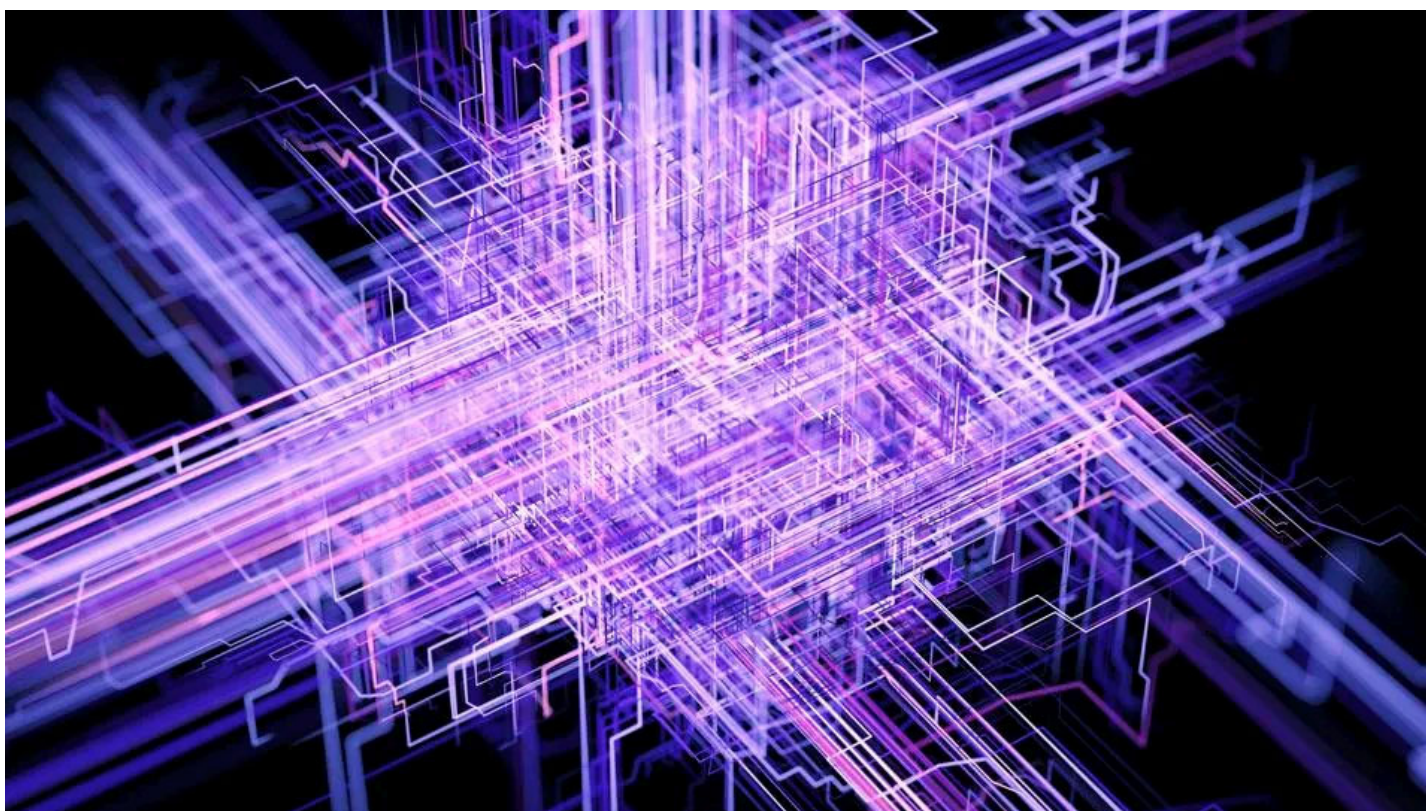


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At the Indigenous Technology Summit in Montreal last month in June 2019, [BlackBerry](#) (NYSE: [BB](#)) announced a [partnership to help Indigenous communities](#) deploy foundational and new technologies that will improve health, education, safety and economic development for First Nations across Canada.

In partnership with [Mustimuhw Information Solutions](#) (MIS) and [Forrest Green](#) and [Microsoft](#), the four companies plan to deliver a mix of next-generation secure communication, cybersecurity, cloud, IoT, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning technologies to Chiefs and Grand Chiefs across Canada to support local service organizations to strengthen their security infrastructure.

MIS is an indigenous software company in the health and social services sector. The company is wholly owned by the Cowichan Tribes, the largest single First Nation in British Columbia. MIS has delivered a community electronic medical record (cEMR) which supports more than 270 First Nations across seven provinces in Canada. The company, a for-profit enterprise, is driven by traditional teachings of Cowichan Tribes to empower First Nations to improve the health of their members.

The project will create a partnership between the public and private sector and the tribes across Canada to develop diverse and culturally relevant technology tools for effective self-determination and governance. The tech companies in the partnership want to ensure

that First Nations have the same access to technology infrastructure that the Federal government uses to manage its citizens' data and well being.

The partnership project also will establish a roadmap to focus technological capacity that benefits First Nations in sectors such as health.

According to Mark Sommerfeld, CEO of MIS, there has been a strong desire from First Nations across Canada to augment their digital and digital health capacity and implement secure data privacy and security controls like BlackBerry tool which are already widely used in Federal agencies.

"Within the federal agencies we work with, there is no absence of well-intentioned people who would like to see the current digital health and privacy and security inequities between First Nations and non-First Nations health teams addressed," said Sommerfeld. "The challenge is largely bureaucratic in terms of the constraints and hurdles that they, and subsequently First Nations, need to overcome to realize equitable investment in both the technology and the necessary support to transition to more efficient, secure and technology-enabled ways of operating – and in our space of supporting their health care needs."

"We are seeing change and are optimistic the current initiative we are working on with Forrest Green can help align these common desires around equity, devolution, reconciliation and Health System Transformation," added Sommerfeld.

And, Sommerfeld says this change can bring equity but points out some inconsistencies in the access to these technologies by First Nations.

"Why do the federal and provincial counterparts of First Nations have resources to access digital tools, and leading-edge security, while First Nations do not? You can be certain that the Federal government leverages, for example, BlackBerry's Spark secure communications platform, and likewise are in the process of leveraging advances in secure cloud infrastructure," said Sommerfeld. "So why do federally-funded First Nations programs not have due investment consideration for similar capacity?"

Sommerfeld adds that in their sector, the digital health revolution has already radically changed how health care is coordinated and delivered across Canada.

"For decades [...], provincial healthcare agencies have invested in digital health tools and processes. It's hard to find a provincially-operated hospital or health clinic today that isn't using multiple electronic health data systems," said Sommerfeld. "It's [...] the way healthcare is managed and delivered in Canada. Digital health is acknowledged as mission-critical."

But Sommerfeld says that same investment trend hasn't happened for First Nations.

"Health program delivery is funded by the federal government, but there's very, very limited investment in digital health tools or infrastructure equivalent to what's supported in provincial agencies. This is a huge gap and a huge inequity," adds Sommerfeld.

Sommerfeld says the irony is that there are purpose-built digital health tools designed to specifically support First Nations' needs, such as the tools Mustimuhw Information Solutions provides, but there's been limited support from the federal government to enable using them.

"First Nations that adopt them are usually on their own to figure out how to support their associated costs, and this isn't an option for many First Nations," adds Sommerfeld.

John Paul, executive director of the [Atlantic Policy Congress First Nations Chiefs Secretariat](#) in Nova Scotia, says Indigenous communities must embrace technology.

"Embracing technology lowers costs and improves outcomes and is one of the fastest-growing sectors for job creation and own-source revenue and supports an Indigenous-led approach to self-determination," said Paul. "We need to focus on educating our youth and building in community technology skills."

But Sommerfeld believes the work with Forrest Green, BlackBerry and Microsoft create an opportunity to shine a spotlight on this technology equity gap.

"I really believe there are a lot of people in the federal government that want to address this gap, and they are motivated to do so. They just needed a mechanism to help channel the support and resources they have available towards a common set of goals and activities," said Sommerfeld.

"This project may be the change that many of us have been waiting for, where there's finally a combination of acknowledgement and action around the current digital disparities that First Nations are dealing with," adds Sommerfeld.

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