

# DIGITAL OPPORTUNITIES COMPASS + DIGITAL STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

The “digital inclusion triangle” of broadband connectivity, device access, and basic digital literacy represent an important foundation for digital opportunities. However, research has demonstrated that digital well-being and empowerment are achieved more sustainably when approached holistically. The Digital Opportunities Compass process aims to ensure sustainable and comprehensive digital empowerment activities within communities and organizations in the context of the larger ecosystem over time. This discussion framework published by academic researchers and practitioners serves as the foundation for this adaptable process.

**Regardless of where a community is at in the digital empowerment process, the Digital Opportunities Compass process builds upon goals, and results in items like the following:**

- Development of a research-backed holistic digital opportunities strategy
- Understanding of long-term assessment of programs and strategies
- Roadmap of next steps, including infrastructure planning, connectivity and sentiment analysis, measurements of digital literacy education needs, feasibility studies, and more
- Creation of healthy digital equity ecosystems
- Capability to track the state of digital opportunities over time
- Support for infrastructure and digital equity grant narratives
- Development of mechanisms for community engagement and inter-institutional collaboration

**Learn more about the factors that impact digital needs sustainably:**



A stakeholder task force in your community will meet with researchers and Merit Network staff periodically to develop goals, create investigation plans, and build strategy and measurement objectives. Together, the unique goals and needs of your community will be assessed and expanded upon in meaningful ways to positively, and sustainably impact the digital divide.

This process includes the exploration of areas such as: local economic factors and business's digital readiness, potential public-private partnerships, opportunities for embedded digital skills training within communities, cultural considerations, job-seeking assistance needs, and broader community outcomes, among others. It identifies six broad areas that impact digital opportunity and its association with community and/or neighborhood level outcomes: Contexts, Governance, Connectivity, Skills, Applications, and Outcomes. These components are closely tied to what research has shown about the factors that affect digital inequalities and, consequently, broader outcomes.

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Since 1966, Merit Network has been a trusted, Michigan-based nonprofit organization providing shared IT resources. We offer high-speed connectivity, professional development courses, and cybersecurity solutions for education, government, libraries, and other nonprofits.

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# DIGITAL STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

## **Extensions of this process could also include recommendations or fund-seeking support for:**

- Household-level sentiment analysis and qualitative investigation to identify residents' perceptions of their broadband needs, intended applications of the technology, and their extant digital skills
- Community education programs and materials that ensure the highest level of uses and outcomes related to broadband connectivity
- Ongoing governance recommendations
- Infrastructure feasibility studies
- Household-level data collection
- Other programs and activities as identified through the strategy development process

Merit researchers will guide your stakeholder task force through a series of bi-weekly online meetings and in-person workshops to co-identify, co-investigate, and co-develop strategies. See below for an example project workflow.

## **COMMUNITY INTAKE/INITIAL RESEARCH ANALYSIS**

- Via email, telephone and online research
- Information gathering: investigation of public data, state of digital ecosystem, historical stumbling blocks, current strategies, funding landscape, community coalitions and others

## **STAKEHOLDER DISCOVERY CALL: GOAL-SETTING AND ONBOARDING**

- Introduction to Digital Opportunities Compass and Digital Strategy Development process
- Identify task force members

## **VIRTUAL TASK FORCE MEETING 1 - INTRODUCTIONS AND GOAL SETTING**

- Digital Opportunities Compass process overview
- Discuss and develop role of task force
- Brainstorm all potential expansions of current strategies, if currently in place
- Identify task force information gathering needs

## **VIRTUAL TASK FORCE MEETING 2 - CONNECTIVITY**

- Discussion of connectivity indicators, barriers, data collection, current infrastructure development plans, others
- Review of existing tools
- Identify expansion areas based on strategic focus

## **VIRTUAL TASK FORCE MEETING 3 - SKILLS AND APPLICATIONS**

- Discussion of skills and applications indicators, such as digital literacy, secure online practices, training, accessible design, public safety, civic engagement, health care, and cultural relevance
  - Evaluation of existing programs and identification of expansion areas
- Review of existing resources to leverage, such as frameworks and standards
- Identify expansion areas based on strategic focus

## **VIRTUAL TASK FORCE MEETING 4 - GOVERNANCE AND CONTEXTS**

- Discussion of governance and contexts indicators such as coordinated policies, available programs, community participation and organizations, public-private partnerships, economic factors, business digital readiness, community assets, and others
- Identify expansion areas

## **VIRTUAL TASK FORCE MEETING 5 - INTEGRATED DISCUSSION OF INDICATOR AREAS**

- Review and discussion of indicator areas, existing tools, and data collection needs
- Preparation for workshop I

## **IN PERSON ½ DAY WORKSHOP 1 - BROADER OUTCOMES AND DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT**

- Review and develop broader outcomes and longitudinal measurements
  - Identification of indicators related to broader effects of improved digital opportunity on the holistic ecosystem
- Co-develop draft strategy or strategy expansion

## **VIRTUAL TASK FORCE MEETING 6 - FUNDING**

- Review of broader outcomes
- Discussion of potential funding sources and strategy sustainability
- Post-meeting individual survey and activities

## **IN PERSON ½ DAY WORKSHOP 2 - FINAL PLANNING AND NEXT STEPS**

- Data analysis report out and co-development of next steps
- Finalization of task force's strategic plan

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