

Top tips

for new professionals in the digital age

How can a young public servant remain up to date in the face of a fast-changing digital world? Here, IPANZ new professionals Luke Aki, Annie De'ath and Paul McGregor give us their seven top tips for new professionals in the digital age.

The public service is working in a digital environment more than ever before. An increasing percentage of New Zealanders' most common transactions with government are being completed online. Public servants work mostly with electronic documents. Many publications are now online only. Meetings are held virtually, webinars are attended from across the world, and useful contacts made without people ever meeting each other in meat-space (or "IRL", as they say in the vernacular).

Telecommuting is more widely adopted and working better than it ever has before thanks to a combination of cultural acceptance, changes in workplace models, and the advances made in the speed, security and versatility of telecommunications technology. The public service is embracing the digital age.

What does this mean for you as a new professional?

As a new professional you are often expected to be at the forefront of digital change. How often do senior colleagues assume younger colleagues are expert users of TwitFaceTube, or digital marketing/social media experts? How often are you as a young new professional approached to hand out pearls of wisdom on the use of social media/how Twitter works/what this Snapchat thing is all about? Whether you expected it of yourself or not, with great expectation comes great responsibility – and opportunities too.

What are the roles, challenges and opportunities you can take responsibility for in your career, as you navigate your way through a public service of the digital age, to become a high-performing and relevant public servant? How can you, as a new professional in the public service, be prepared to deal with constantly evolving technology and the changes this brings? Here are a few thoughts:

1. Be a leader in the digital age – take on challenging new roles and lead



Luke Aki, IPANZ new professional

by example. You don't have to be perfect, so don't be afraid of making mistakes. If at first you don't succeed, simply try again. Making mistakes and then fixing them is an important part of learning. Some schools of thought say it is the

only genuine way to learn. Learn to live with your mistakes, and to fix them. Take on tough new challenges and be prepared to navigate change as it comes, ready for whatever the future may bring.

2. Ride the stereotype – if people think you're a digital technology expert, you've got your foot in the door to work on some exciting projects. Sign up, learn the ropes, and your personal development will come along in leaps and bounds. But remember to manage expectations about what you are capable of if you do sign up. Find your niche and get stuck in. Be passionate and play to your strengths, even while developing new ones.



3. **Never stop learning and remain current** – challenge yourself to get stuck in and learn new things. In an increasingly digital environment, it is important to continuously develop your skills, capability and knowledge and remain up to date. It will stand you in good stead in the future. Lifelong learning should be a default approach to your career development.

4. **Challenge and expect more from your organisation** – help identify what it would look like for your organisation if you and your colleagues were excelling in a digital age. Expect more from your colleagues and from your organisation. Set a benchmark for excellence and lead by example, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and building capability. Examine what works well in world-leading organisations and apply relevant best practice to your work in a digital environment. Challenge everyone you work with to do the same. Only adopt best practice that adds value to important things.

5. **Explore new opportunities** – do something new, even if it scares you and you feel out of your depth. No one starts out as an expert; you build yourself up to become one. Be an early adopter of digital innovations and new technology, or get involved in areas you haven't worked in before. However, be realistic about what you can take on as you cannot do everything – try one or two things at a time that play to your strengths. It is not all about gaining technical skills but the ability to work effectively in a digital environment. Take calculated risks on new and emerging technology if necessary – risk and reward go hand in hand.

6. **Surround yourself with experts** – the best way to learn is to learn from the experts. Work with people who are better than you, watch and learn from them. Set expectations with everyone about sharing relevant knowledge and helping build capability within the

Practical examples of what new professionals can do in the digital age

- Open your team's and manager's eyes to innovative ways of working, for example, using Google's Government apps, using better engagement improvement tools such as Tiny Pulse, using electronic project management tools like Trello, Asana or Basecamp instead of hundreds of sticky notes. There is a whole world of electronic tools out there, and the public service needs to tap into that useful resource to work smarter and better deliver services to the public.
- Attend GovHack to see what the private sector wants from the public sector.
- Join or create a community of practice for learning and sharing with each other, for example, at your own workplace, or join a tech or 'career & business' MeetUp group (<http://www.meetup.com>).
- Take an online course on Coursera or Udemy on coding, using technology in business, etc.
- Learn about business intelligence concepts, techniques and tools.

team. Join or create a community of practice, a club or interest group related to digital technology and innovation in order to learn from each other and share what you are working on. Having a group of experts whose knowledge you can easily access can be invaluable in quickly solving a seemingly complex problem you are struggling with – "it's easy when you know how" is the usual phrase.

7. **Be a public servant. Literally** – Champion access for the public to information held by public service agencies. Maintain at least a basic understanding of how digital information is treated and used, including understanding the fundamentals of the Official Information Act. Retain a strong customer focus in all the work you do, and always review whether what you plan to do will add value for the final customer – the New Zealand public.

However, remember that most of what matters does not change as fast as technology, format or the medium. Legislation and frameworks change slowly and are typically technology-neutral, so staying current is not an onerous task. Capability, experience and some skills

remain relevant for longer than the technology you started building it with in the first place – so do not put off acquiring the knowledge and capability today on the assumption it will be obsolete tomorrow. No one can accurately predict what the future will look like in 10 years' time, but the choice to be prepared for it is in your hands.

Your value as a new professional is in being at the forefront of digital change with your finger on the pulse of modern developments and innovation. We are expected to live and breathe the digital age and all it entails – so grab the opportunities, take on the challenges, and be a part of building a public service that excels in the digital world. ■

IPANZ New Professionals aim to connect, develop and inspire 18–39 year olds who are in the early to mid-stages of their public sector career. They hold inspirational speaker series, professional development and networking events and a biennial conference. Join their free mailing list at www.ipanz.org.nz/newprofessionals.