Creating Space for Digital Work - One *Code Day* at A Time

*[Quotes to embed]*

*“MAESD Code Day was an amazing opportunity to get out of our silos (physical and mental), and spend a day learning and working with fellow civil servants who are passionate about their work. I didn’t need to come in with a lot of coding expertise to feel that I benefited from the day.”*

~Wilfrid Chan

*“Code day was a fun opportunity to improve my web development skills while getting to know fellow coders. It’s a great way for busy OPSers to learn new skills or find ways to do things more efficiently.”*

~Meagan Cameron

*“It was really great, I had an incredibly happy team coming back after code day, looking forward to the next one, and pumped about the contacts they made during the day.”*

*~ Christine Hagyard*

*[Pictures from Ian:* [*https://www.flickr.com/photos/geographer700/sets/72157679275798136*](https://www.flickr.com/photos/geographer700/sets/72157679275798136)*]*

*Imagine. You are knee deep in debugging your masterpiece data model. You’re ever so close to finding that elusive bug. You’ve been avoiding e-mail, but finally, a subject line you can’t avoid: “URGENT RUSH FACT CHECK DUE 3 HOURS AGO EVEN THOUGH YOU JUST RECEIVED IT.”*

There are few better feelings than when your code runs flawlessly (ok, maybe that’s just us). However, when your job involves policy decision notes, executive briefings, and communications, switching gears to coding or modelling can be impossibly taxing on the brain.

Sometimes we have to get away from the [urgent tasks to get to the important ones](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_91.htm). We don’t need to tell followers of this blog how useful digital products can be in bringing better information to users, inside or outside government, with greater efficiency. Developing these products, whether they’re analytical models, web apps or database scripts, is challenging and often requires undisturbed “flow.”

To compound this, often individuals with great technical skills on the “business” or “policy” side of an organization have often challenges finding peers to collaborate with across their organization that can help them find data or share methods.

To help address some of these challenges, our area decided to organize an impromptu “Code Day.” It was a full day for folks to build awesome things with their colleagues, no matter the tool, from Excel to R to Python to Javascript.

To be honest, we didn’t think about it too hard or do a ton of planning. We sent a semi-witty invite (in our opinions) to about 15 people, asked them to spread the word, booked a big space, and planned to order some pizza. It was about 30 minutes to think up, and maybe 4 or 5 hours of work over a few weeks that our superstar administrator mostly handled.

There was no curriculum or training, though we posted a few links on Slack and GitHub for those that wanted to focus on self-directed learning. We didn’t do much more than provide an “excuse” for people to focus on cool projects or develop skills. The hardest part was negotiating for a big enough room.

By 10:30am, we had over 15 people from across the ministry deep in their projects and learning from each other, most of whom we didn’t know. It turns out there are plenty of passionate policy analysts who want to bring a new dimension to their work! It didn’t take a big seminar or an expensive training course. We just had to give them space, some links, and kind of leave them alone unless/until they had questions.

People passionate about their work found their peers, and came up with ideas for new projects, tools and ways to access data. We ended the day with an optional show and tell, and a few of the projects included [we’ll add screenshots for some]:

* A series of web-based maps that showed various employment and training metrics across the ministry
* Automation of a series of manually generated monthly financial reports that are more accurate and user-friendly
* An interactive, web-based dashboard to compare funding levels and revenue of postsecondary institutions
* A web scraping tool to retrieve data from websites that do not offer it in tidy formats

Beyond these projects, many individuals used the day to learn entirely new frameworks and tools they can bring back to their jobs. In our case, we partnered with another division and our IT cluster since then to launch a server that can be used to share interactive data visualizations and models across our ministry and with our stakeholders. It turns out there are several other areas around the provincial government that wanted to use the same platform.

One manager said her staff came back from Code Day “jacked up” and motivated! Another Director from another ministry stopped in, and just launched a Code Day of their own.

Some might think their leadership will never go for this. In our case, our leadership thought it was a great way to bring the innovative ideas out from around the ministry. We didn’t ask for or need any approval. Our leaders are dreaming of “digital briefings” that would replace the piles of paper that we’re sure they read \*every\* \*single\* \*word\* of with interactive products to help them explore different policy scenarios or operational metrics.

More importantly, the day made it easier for people to find help and collaborate without going through government hierarchy, helped business and technical minds “get” each other, and gave people the space and “permission” to focus on the task at hand rather than the frequent requests they might get peppered with throughout a day.

We did have a few lessons for the day, though. For one thing, coding is exhausting. People were mentally checking out around 3. We each spent about 30 minutes looking for a bug that turned out to be a single uncapitalized letter in our respective projects, and were assured by the room that is completely normal. The results of coding are cool, but the process is really not always very sexy.

In the future, we’d probably the day a bit shorter (or order coffee). We’re certainly planning to host an event again, and will invite more people, ask others to co-host, and maybe set up remote video for those that work outside of the downtown Toronto core.

We hope this post inspires you to think of your own creative ways to bring innovation and a digital-first mindset to your own organization. Comments, ideas, and questions are welcome!