



BUSINESS

HOW DIGITAL INVESTMENT HAS MADE NORTHERN IRELAND A HOMING BEACON FOR SKILLS AND INNOVATION



Introduction: Why Northern Ireland's post-Covid future looks bright

Northern Ireland has set a high bar for embracing digital change.

Organisations across the country had to move quickly during the pandemic, bringing forward digital transformation plans and taking decisive action on technology investment.

And making the choice to invest proved a lifeline to many organisations, supporting them as they moved office-based workers to home, connected customers with digital services and improved their use of data to create better outcomes for citizens and customers.

Technology has helped soften the negative impact of Covid-19 on Northern Irish businesses and is set to be a crucial tool in stemming the so-called '[brain drain](#)', keeping Northern Ireland's brightest minds on home soil while also attracting new talent to the country.

Northern Irish leaders are responding emphatically and investing in a digitally enabled future. Belfast City Council already has several initiatives in place to improve the digital infrastructure and attract talent to the area.

[Smart Belfast](#) and [Innovation City Belfast](#) both bring together universities, businesses, local government and citizens to collaborate, innovate and ensure Belfast becomes a globally significant destination for digital capability.

Innovation City Belfast alone has committed to invest £120 million in innovation.

And Northern Ireland sits in a unique position as a member of both the UK and EU single markets.

The stage is set for a period of exceptional growth and innovation.

We partnered with the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr) to understand the scale of these digital changes and their impact across the UK.

Our research found that the pandemic accelerated digital progress in Northern Ireland by 3.7 years – higher than the UK average of 3 years.

Why Northern Ireland's post-Covid future looks bright

Across the UK this acceleration led to the following increases, during a time when some might have expected these numbers to fall:

4.9% increase in customer satisfaction

3.6% increase in employee satisfaction

3.4% increase in employee productivity

Our research also found that digital adoption is set to have a significant impact on the UK economy, potentially adding £76 billion to UK GDP by 2025.

That figure could be £236 billion by 2040.

But what do these numbers really mean for you and your organisation? We've created this short Northern Ireland focused report to help you answer that question.

Read on to find out more.



“Over the next decade, innovative technologies are going to have profound impacts on our economy and on society. With Belfast’s proud history of research excellence, vibrant community of innovators and start-ups and significant investment on the horizon through the Belfast Region City Deal, the city is perfectly positioned to make the most of opportunities presented by innovation – not least by creating more and better jobs and improving quality of life.”

- Innovation City Belfast



The pandemic accelerated digital progress in Northern Ireland by 3.7 years

Key findings

Areas of digital adoption in Northern Ireland

71% made changes in hybrid working policies (compared to 55% UK average)

71% made changes in digital delivery of services (compared to 50% UK average)

50% made changes in their use of big data and analytics (compared to 33% UK average)

88% of Northern Irish decision-makers state Covid-19 has accelerated the use of technology across their organisations

Additional hours of leisure time Northern Irish employees get working remotely vs. in the office

1.6 hours a day (compared to 2 hours UK average)

Positive impact of digital change vs. 2019 across the whole of the UK

4.9% increase in customer satisfaction

3.6% increase in employee satisfaction

3.4% increase in employee productivity

Views on digital change by sector across the whole of the UK

65% in public administration and defence said changes were positive

53% in health said the same

50% in education said the same

Potential net migration to NI as a result of hybrid working, based on respondents who declared interest in moving to the region

71,000 additional people



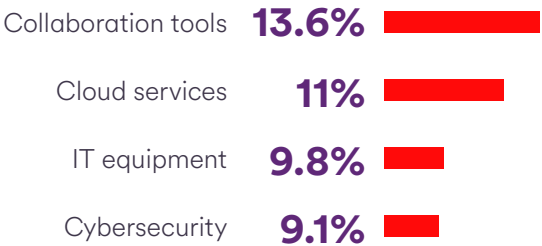
How and why has Northern Ireland accelerated its adoption of digital technology during Covid-19?

The pandemic made remote working a necessity regardless of whether an organisation sat in the public or private sector. And companies adapted to this new way of working with varying levels of preparedness and success.

The deciding factor of this success was decision-makers' willingness to invest in hybrid working technologies.

Collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams, cloud services and enhanced cybersecurity – all these technologies allowed Northern Irish firms to keep functioning when office spaces became obsolete.

Spend increase on hybrid working technologies across the UK:



Decision-makers moved quickly to make these investments, and many likely saw them as temporary measures. But then the benefits of hybrid working started to make themselves known.

Employees suddenly had more time in the day. A better work/life balance. More control over their own routines.

And these factors all played a part in creating a happier workforce – our research found that employee satisfaction has risen by 3.6% during a time many might expect it to fall.

Some organisations, such as Foyle Foods in Northern Ireland, are now fully embracing hybrid working, putting policy in place to make the vision a reality. And it's a solution that puts employees at

its heart, supporting them in maintaining work/life balance on their terms.

As Allan Patterson, Head of IT, told us, **“We want to support our employees in maintaining their work and life balance with a career that complements their schedule both inside and outside of the workplace. We firmly believe that our approach to investment in IT solutions as a company is what is ideal for supporting our employees.”**

Foyle Foods isn't the only organisation seeing the benefits of hybrid working. As these benefits become clear across the UK, decision-makers are now looking to make the changes in hybrid working permanent.

Top reasons UK decision-makers are making change in hybrid working policies permanent, according to our research:

- Employees' demand because of an improved work/life balance
- Improved service quality and experience e.g. digitalising, ecommerce, contact centre, new markets
- Organisation decision-making

How and why has Northern Ireland accelerated its adoption of digital technology during Covid-19?

Hybrid working will be an important tool in helping to stem the Northern Ireland ‘brain drain’.

An employee who can work from anywhere is an employee with greater freedom to choose where they live without the pressure of needing to relocate to secure their desired job.

Based on our research, there’s also an estimated 71,000 people who could move to Northern Ireland if hybrid working allowed it - bringing an influx of talent into the region that would also serve to replace any potentially lost skills from the area.

With the right investment in digital infrastructure (already being pioneered by Belfast through Smart

Belfast and Innovation City Belfast), Northern Ireland can attract remote workers to the region, boosting the local economy in the process.

Our research found that the remote working revolution could boost regional economies by as much as £33.3 billion

“Northern Ireland already has a shortage of people with degrees and an over-supply of people with lower-level qualifications. Without addressing educational migration as part of a broader upskilling strategy, Northern Ireland is missing out on the contribution these graduates could make to a growing economy.”

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal



Delivering better digital services to Northern Ireland

Online shopping and transactions, digital prescriptions from doctors, automating services across both public and private sectors – the online delivery of services has been essential in keeping organisations running across Northern Ireland.

Decision-makers have been improving their customer and citizen experiences to ensure that digital journeys are as impactful and personable as possible.

And they've been supporting this focus on experience with investment in ecommerce technologies such as database management technology and robust backend frameworks to support transactions.

This decision to invest in digital services has allowed organisations to empower their employees to work more effectively, freeing them from time-consuming administration tasks to focus on work where they can add greater value.

And this has led to a rise in employee productivity – up 3.4% across the UK during a time some may expect it to fall.

As digital services become more common, so too does the expectation of businesses to offer them, leading to some organisations completely overhauling their service delivery to future-proof and get ahead of their competition.



Spend increase on digital service technologies across the UK:

9.6%
Customer experience



9.4%
Digital and contactless payments



9.2%
Automation



7.5%
Ecommerce technologies



Delivering better digital services to Northern Ireland

The rise of digital players has put pressure on traditional banks to keep up. Consumers now expect a better and more consistent self-service online banking experience using the latest banking apps and tools.

To stay ahead of the curve, Northern Ireland's Danske Bank placed a big emphasis on its digital strategy — offering customers a digital branch with a human touch. The bank wanted to adopt paperless banking, digital transactions, wearable device payments and other digital services.

And it knew connectivity was essential to underpin these services. So Danske Bank upgraded its connectivity tenfold across its 30 branches, going from 10mbps to 100mbps in the process. The organisation also invested in 3/4g backup connectivity in rural areas where ATMs had replaced banks.

For the first time in the bank's history it had the ability to support its most remote sites with fast, reliable connectivity and offer the kind of digital banking services its local communities are increasingly demanding.

“Operational resilience is critical in our industry,” says Dr Séamus Gallagher, Head of IT & Information Security, Danske Bank UK.

“We want our customer experience to be the same throughout their journey – whether they come to us in branch, by phone or online.”

“Likewise, we want our staff to feel that they have the option to work flexibly. Offering digital services and tools which are aligned to our brand is essential in today's digitally-enabled world, and connectivity is the crucial factor that underpins our ability to do this.”

Like Danske Bank, private sector organisations across Northern Ireland are shifting their services to digital and seeing improvements in productivity. And it's happening in the public sector too.

Eamann Dunne, Head of ICT programs at Northern Ireland Water, says that digital services are now an essential part of how the organisation interacts with its customers.

“Our online portal lets them pay bills, request septic tank services, or speak with our automated customer service.” says Eamann.

“Not only do these additions make for a better level of service for our customers, they also mean our employees are equipped with the right tools to support them in their jobs and help them to be as productive as possible.”

And more productive employees make for happier decision-makers, which is why these key individuals are now looking to make their changes in digital delivery of services permanent to secure the long-term benefits of digital change.

Top reasons UK decision-makers are making the change in digital delivery of services permanent, according to our research:

- Improved service quality service and experience e.g. digitalising, ecommerce, contact centre, new markets
- Lower total fixed costs e.g. offices/sites rent
- Organisation decision making



“We passionately support anything that equips women with the skills they need to develop their own businesses or careers. Northern Ireland embracing digital transformation and hybrid working can help us retain talent but also create further opportunities for mothers, carers, or others previously locked out of office-based roles. It’s a great story for equality and the economic success of our society.”

Roseann Kelly, CEO, Women In Business NI

The power of data to create better experiences for us all

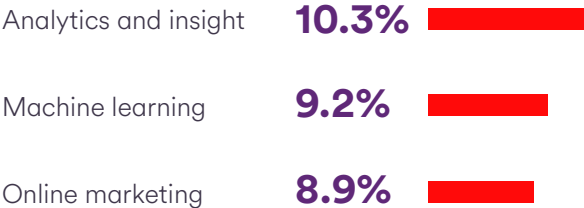
While not always seen as the showstopper of transformation, the ability to gather, analyse and use data more efficiently is crucial in supporting both hybrid working and the digital delivery of services.

And without it the show would come to a halt, which is why cities like Belfast have placed such a big emphasis on the value of data in the decision-making processes.

End to end patient care, identifying key territories for investment, pre-empting issues before they arise – the potential of data is only limited by our ability to gather and distil it.

Better data means better decision-making, which means improved outcomes for customers, citizens and employees.

Spend increase on data and analytics tools across the UK:



The rapid improvements in the use of data during the pandemic have already had an impact on customer satisfaction rates

Organisations armed with the right information can approach business in a more holistic fashion and make faster, more accurate decisions that place customers and citizens at the heart of the solution.

The rapid improvements in the use of data during the pandemic have already had an impact on customer satisfaction rates – rising by 4.9%, according to our research.

And the role of data extends beyond informing digital services and hybrid working.

Data allows organisations to improve even their physical services, tailoring them more closely to what consumers and citizens actually want and improving processes along the way.



The power of data to create better experiences for us all

At Belfast City Airport, the deployment of a Cisco Meraki hardware and software solution, supported by high-speed dedicated internet access, has revolutionised passenger experiences – improving both digital and physical services.

The deployment included seamless firmware upgrades, removing vulnerabilities in their network and ensuring every device was secure. But the interesting part is what can be done with this improved connectivity.

Connectivity has a knock-on effect of improving the delivery of all services – from internet of things (IoT) connectivity and customer experience, to improved security through better communications, passenger flow management and cross-functional team collaboration.

The passenger experience at Belfast City Airport has improved drastically – the wait times at security sit at six minutes, the fastest in the UK. Passengers can easily use the improved network to check flight times, navigate around the airport or get last-minute work done.

The team at Belfast City Airport told us, **“Everything just works, which means we can focus on the things that matter. Our staff can get on with doing their jobs. Our passengers can take full advantage of the vital connectivity for business or pleasure ensuring their time in the airport is productive and enjoyable.”**

In short: everyone gets to use their time more wisely thanks to better data and connectivity.


For decision-makers, time can be as precious a resource as money – freeing up employees to focus on more important value-add tasks where they can increase productivity and profit.

And as better use of data has freed up this valuable time, decision-makers are now looking to secure these benefits for the long term and make these changes permanent.



Top reasons UK decision makers are making changes in data and analytics permanent, according to our research:

- Real-time data intelligence and insight
- Employee demand because of increased productivity
- Improved service quality service and experience e.g. digitalising, ecommerce, contact centre, new markets

A photograph of an airport terminal interior. The scene is dominated by large windows that let in bright light, creating a high-contrast environment. In the foreground and middle ground, several people are silhouetted against the light from the windows. Some are standing, some are sitting on chairs, and one person is walking on the right. The floor is highly reflective, mirroring the silhouettes and the light from the windows. A central pillar is visible, and some indoor plants are scattered throughout the space. The overall mood is busy and modern.

“Data sits at the heart of effective and informed decision-making. From improving passenger experiences to deciding how best to allocate resources, better use of data has transformed our ability to create more efficient processes, reduce our waiting times and improve customer communication.”

Brian Roche, Director of IT, Belfast City Airport

Next steps

There are those who may argue Northern Ireland started its digital transformation journey behind the rest of the UK when the pandemic struck. And our research suggests there is some truth to this statement.

But true or not, the rate of digital acceleration in Northern Ireland far exceeds any perceived difference. Decision-makers and employees have championed digital change and set the tone for the rest of the UK to follow.

Now there is an opportunity to:

- Simplify and streamline internal processes
- Improve business resilience and agility to react better to future challenges
- Strengthen working relationships between public and private sector organisations to create better employee, customer and citizen experiences
- Pivot existing business models to capture a greater market share, both in-person and online

“One hundred years ago, Northern Ireland was internationally renowned for its shipbuilding, rope works and linen factories. Today we are global leaders in cyber security, fintech and advanced manufacturing. We must be ready to embrace future economic trends and job opportunities for our people.”

Belfast City Council

Belfast in particular is setting itself up for future success by emphasising the importance of digital skills and connectivity and making funds available for investment. Now the focus must be on stemming the ‘brain drain’ and investing in crucial connectivity infrastructure to attract further investment in the region.

By encouraging flexible working, increasing the digital delivery of services and exploring ways to analyse data to improve decision-making, your organisation can thrive in the wake of Covid-19.

And these digital transformation projects free up considerable resources to use elsewhere.

Want to know how we can help you make the most of these opportunities?

Let's have a conversation



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Read the full report:

[CEBR Report on Digital Transformation | Virgin Media Business](#)