



## E-Signature in Government:

- The Benefits of E-Signature Solutions
- Types & Public Sector Applications
- Key Considerations
- Lessons Learned One Year into the Pandemic



Image Source: [Gov.UK](https://www.gov.uk)

**JOINT COUNCILS' EXECUTIVE MONTHLY REPORT**

Developed by the Research Committee

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# 1. Introduction

The Canadian public sector is leveraging progress towards digitization and modernizing the way they do business and serve clients. Electronic signatures (e-Signatures) is a key example of how government is integrating technology into the traditional work process to transform service delivery.<sup>1</sup>

With the rise of the digital age, e-Signatures have become an important tool to express written consent on government documentation. However, the concept of e-Signatures is nothing new. According to the Government of Canada (GC), “a number of jurisdictions, including the GC and Canada’s provinces and territories, have developed laws, policies and standards for electronic documents and e-signatures since the mid-1990s”.<sup>2</sup>

E-Signatures are increasingly becoming a regular part of business operations to get documents signed and to deliver faster public services. Replacing paper-based processes with electronic practices enables government at all levels to streamline its internal and external business processes. It also enables government to improve how it delivers services to clients.

*The Province of Ontario’s Electronic Commerce Act (ECA) defines an electronic signature as “information in electronic form that a person has created or adopted in order to sign a document and that is in, attached to or associated with the document”.<sup>3</sup>*

1, 2. [Government of Canada Guidance on Using Electronic Signatures](#)  
3. [Electronic Commerce Act, 2000, S.O. 2000, c. 17](#)  
4, 5. [Five Reasons to Add Electronic Signatures to Government Processes](#)

## Why is this Report Important?

- The COVID-19 pandemic (“the pandemic”) forced most of the global population to work from home, maintain social distance and lead a contactless life in public. This new normal fast-tracked the adoption of e-Signatures across the public sector to meet the needs of clients in a contact-less environment.
- Prior to e-Signatures, government organizations relied heavily on paper-based processes to obtain signatures for forms and other documents. These processes included printing, scanning, and faxing papers manually. Managing and collecting signatures creates a significant roadblock for government employees due to the increasing time spent filing and maintaining physical documents.<sup>4</sup>
- Paper-based processes may also become frustrating for clients and derail government from achieving mandates that aim to streamline their process and create a user-friendly service delivery experience.<sup>5</sup>

## What is Covered in this Executive Report?

This report includes the following:

- Introduction
- The Benefits of E-Signature Solutions
- Types & Public Sector Applications
- Key Considerations
- Lessons Learned One Year into the Pandemic

## 2. The Benefits of E-Signatures

E-Signatures are most beneficial when they are simple and easy to use for both government employees and clients. It is also important that they are integrated with digital systems that are already in place. The following are four key benefits associated with adopting e-Signature solutions in government processes:



### Speed

Significantly speeds up government processes.<sup>6</sup> In addition to collecting signatures electronically, they have evolved to automate the entire operation. From document creation, collaboration, execution, to archiving and management.



### Security & Digital Authenticity

Some government documents contain sensitive information and are very confidential. E-signature software provides superior security and authentication capabilities to users.<sup>7</sup> These solutions can be integrated with various authentication protocols and security applications as needed.



### Increased Responsiveness & Efficiency

Paper-based processes are time intensive and increases the administrative workload for employees. Implementing e-Signature solutions can help government organizations improve responsiveness considerably by reducing the time employees spend tracking and processing documents.<sup>8</sup> This creates an opportunity for employees to focus on other tasks (i.e. responding to clients seeking assistance) and ultimately boost internal operations and productivity.



### Cost Savings

Reduces the costs associated with purchasing the supplies needed to prepare and process paper-based forms and other documents (i.e. paper, ink and postage).<sup>9</sup> It also eliminates the need for physical storage spaces. Electronic signing and filing saves time by reducing trips to the printer, mailbox, and storage locations. It enables easier distribution of signed documents, as they can be mailed to multiple recipients. These benefits save money and improve efficiency for government organizations that rely heavily on records.

6. [Five Reasons to Add Electronic Signatures to Government Processes](#)

7. [Is the Electronic Signature a Good Idea or a Bad Idea?](#)

8, 9. [Benefits Of Using Electronic Signatures At All Levels Of Government](#)

### 3. E-Signature Types & Public Sector Applications

E-Signatures and paper-based signatures have the same fundamental purpose. A signature links a person to a document (or transaction) and typically provides evidence of that person’s intent to approve or to be legally bound by its contents.<sup>10</sup>

The following are some examples of the types of e-Signatures commonly used:

- **Simple (or Basic) Electronic Signatures:** All electronic types of signatures that prove acceptance or approval by the signer by using some sort of certification. This can be a signature manually drawn on a desktop screen (and digitally saved) a click on a “I accept” button, etc. This type of e-Signature does not require any ID verification from the signer.<sup>11</sup>
- **Advanced Electronic Signatures (AES):** This signature must meet specific requirements providing higher level or signer verification, security ID verification, and tamper sealing (meaning the document cannot be changed upon signing). AES requires ID verification from the signer.<sup>12</sup>
- **Qualified Electronic Signatures (QES):** Provides the highest security and assurance levels. QES are validated through a multi-step process based on encrypted keys and double factor authentication. QES requires the ID verification to be completed face-to-face (either remotely via video chat or in person).<sup>13</sup>

10. [Government of Canada Guidance on Using Electronic Signatures](#)  
11, 12, 13. [Three types of Electronic Signatures and how to choose the right type for your transactions](#)  
14. [Social Assistance COVID-19 Recovery Plan: Centralized and Automated Intake](#)  
15. [CRA and COVID-19: Electronic Signatures](#)  
16. [Electronic Signatures: GUIDANCE FOR POLICY MAKERS AND DESIGN TEAMS](#)  
17. [Alberta ELECTRONIC TRANSACTIONS ACT](#)

#### Examples of E-Signature Applications in the Public Sector

##### Ontario

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) established the [Social Assistance COVID-19 Recovery Plan](#) to meet the needs of clients during the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> The Plan aims to centralize and automate the intake of social assistance applications. A key component includes moving the application process online to allow a user-friendly experience for Ontarians. Through the new digital application, clients are able to submit their signature electronically.

##### Government of Canada

In March 2020, the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) announced that [the organization will recognize e-Signatures](#) as having met the signature requirements of the Income Tax Act.<sup>15</sup> This is part of the federal [COVID-19 Economic Response Plan](#). This measure was extended for the [2021 tax filing season](#), as the government continues to explore methods to make it permanent. The use of e-Signatures solutions will reduce the need for taxpayers and tax preparers to meet in-person. It will also reduce the administrative burden for employees during the pandemic.

##### British Columbia

E-Signatures have been adopted across the Government of British Columbia (BC). For example, the [Ministry of Children and Family Development](#) launched the [AdoptKidsBC](#) portal in 2016.<sup>16</sup> This portal moved all of the paperwork for the adoption process online, including e-Signatures. The system uses the BC government’s identity management solutions (BCeID).

##### Alberta

E-Signatures are governed by Alberta’s [Electronic Transactions Act \(ETA\)](#). Unless a document is excluded from the ETA, documents can be signed electronically.<sup>17</sup> Documents excluded include: Wills and codicils; Trusts created by wills or codicils; Enduring powers of attorney under the Powers of Attorney Act; Personal directives under the Personal Directives Act; Records that create or transfer interests in land, including interests in mines and minerals; Guarantees under the Guarantees Acknowledgment Act; and Negotiable instruments.

## 4. Key Considerations of E-Signature Solutions in the Public Sector

E-Signatures can facilitate faster execution and delivery of contracts, consents and other electronic records. However, there are a number of factors organizations need to consider before adopting e-Signature solutions within their operational framework. Some considerations include:<sup>18</sup>



### Compliance with Legislation

- Does the organization's use of e-Signatures comply with federal regulatory requirements?
- Do the organization's governing instruments (articles, bylaws, trust indenture, partnership agreement, etc.) impose limitations on the execution of documents and instruments in a way that will limit the ability to use e-Signatures?

*In Canada, an e-Signature has the same legal status as a handwritten signature. E-Signatures in Canada are regulated federally by the Personal Information and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA).<sup>19</sup> All provinces have also enacted legislation for e-Signatures.*



### E-Signature Provider

- If using a full e-Signature solution, which provider will the organization partner with?



### Cost

- What is the cost of setting up the infrastructure around an e-Signature process and the workload associated with implementing the proposed e-Signature process?
- How much is the organization prepared to spend to implement an e-Signature solution?



### Security & Risk

- What security protocols will be put in place?
- What are the risks and associated costs of a client disputing the signature?



### Client Acceptance & Accessibility

- Will clients accept the use of e-Signatures?
- Will clients be able to use e-Signatures based on key considerations (i.e. accessibility)?

18. [Electronic Signatures in the COVID-Age](#)

19. [Government of Canada Guidance on Using Electronic Signatures](#)

## 5. E-Signatures: Lessons Learned One Year into the Pandemic

The use of e-Signatures across the public sector has been in effect for a number of years. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the importance of relying on e-Signatures, in lieu of traditional paper-based signatures. With the unexpected and drastic shift to a remote work environment, the use of e-signatures is a key strategy governments at all levels are utilizing to enhance efficiency to meet operational and client needs.<sup>20</sup>

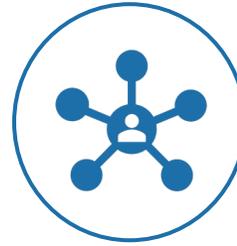
The lessons learned regarding the public sector's use of e-Signatures thus far have been imperative. The following are some lessons learned during the pandemic that can be leveraged to shape operations in the future:

20. [Electronic Signatures: Is Your Municipality Ready to Embrace A New Approach?](#)

21. [How To Introduce E-Signature Technology Into Your Business Processes](#)

22. [Electronic Signatures: A "New Normal"](#)

### E-Signature Solutions Lessons Learned:



As the reliance on e-Signatures continues to grow, it is important that the public sector focus on **enhancing internal communication and marketing to ensure departments and business lines are aware that the solution is available**. This will ensure the benefits of e-Signatures is realized across the organization.



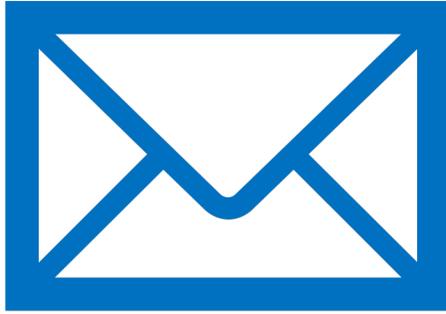
One of the biggest challenges organizations face is implementing new technology(s). With e-Signature software (and any other new software), a learning curve exists. This can be concerning for some employees. It may be difficult to convince employees that this software solution will improve their work experience without them understanding it. Government leaders must effectively **advocate and educate employees on why e-Signature solutions are needed and how they will be effective for their workflow**.<sup>21</sup>



Over the past twenty years, e-Signature solutions have proven to be a technological innovation that is constantly changing and leveraging digital advancements. It is important that organizations **stay on top of new product capabilities to ensure updates are being utilized to suit business needs**.



E-Signature solutions are here to stay. Many clients have embraced the benefits of this technology. However, many others may be resistant due to key concerns (i.e. security, privacy, access to technology). It is important to prioritize external communication and marketing strategies to **educate the public on common misconceptions regarding e-Signatures, as well as the security, authentication, and data protection measures in place to protect clients**.<sup>22</sup> Addressing misconceptions will be important once the pandemic is long over, and the "new normal" remains.



## For Further Reading

- [Do we really need all this paper? Helping remote work succeed by using more digitized documents](#)
- [The future of government service delivery is already here](#)
- [New e-signature law a win for advisors](#)
- [Electronic Signatures: Is Your Municipality Ready To Embrace A New Approach?](#)

## Other noteworthy articles:

[Pandemic has raised unique privacy challenges](#)

[Modernizing single sign-on for digital citizen services](#)

[How National Digital IDs Benefit Both Citizens And Businesses](#)

[COVID-19 cemented the need for intelligent citizen services](#)

[Your customers have changed - are you changing with them?](#)

## Research Repository

Access the Citizen First [Research Repository](#).

**Recent entries on the research repository:**

[Client Experience \(CX\) In the New Normal](#)

This report is titled: Client Experience (CX) In the New Normal. The report explores: The balance between high-touch and high-tech, Key drivers of CX during COVID-19 Data-driven CX , and Lessons learned one year into the pandemic.



## Trends in the Daily Newsletter



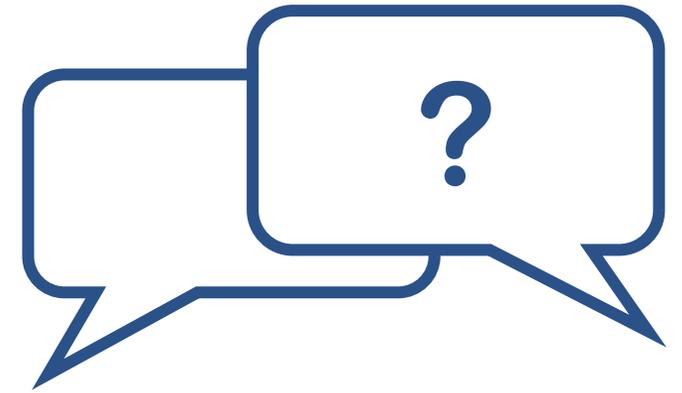
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused millions of Canadians to access the services they need online. Now, a growing number also want more digital options for fast, easy access to public services. [A new survey](#) commissioned by ServiceNow reveals if given the choice, at least two-thirds of Canadians prefer to access services digitally, across federal (69%), provincial (70%) and municipal services (65%).



According to an article featured in [NextGov](#), the case for focusing on design during IT digital modernization and transformation efforts is clear. The return on time or money invested in design thinking is exponentially higher than the cost, and the added benefit of user outreach and engagement makes the value even greater. Government organizations should make sure to include design thinking as an integral part of IT procurements to help save money, create better products and delight their users.



According to [GCN](#), government organizations at all levels must remember: Citizens are customers. As such, they expect a modern customer experience that's frictionless and efficient. Citizens want to be able to submit forms online, get answers in real-time via chat and have their information auto-populated in online forms based on past submissions. Yet, there are also times when they still want to pick up the phone and talk to a human. To meet this demand for flexibility and convenience, quality and speed, organizations must shift to digital and automated business processes.



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