

CEDA media release

## **Australia needs chief technologist to power data and digital future: CEDA**

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The Federal Government should appoint a Chief Technologist and commit to transparent and independent technology assessments for Australia to become a leading digital nation, says the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA).

The announcement of a \$1.2 billion Digital Economy Strategy in last week's Federal Budget shows the Government is now firmly focussed on its technology agenda.

CEDA Chief Executive Melinda Cilento says Australia can no longer afford to be a follower in the digital and technology sphere.

"We must ensure we make the most of these important new initiatives," Ms Cilento said.

"That includes making sure the public understands and accepts these ambitions, and their expectations are reflected in them."

Australia's experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that a proactive technology agenda will be critical to driving future jobs, growth and prosperity, as well as enhancing our wellbeing and quality of life.

"There is much to be gained from our turbocharged take up of digital technologies over the past year, and the new sources of data this has created," Ms Cilento said.

"They must be harnessed to deliver new opportunities for all Australians."

Australia has recently appointed its seventh technology minister in just eight years. Over that period, technology has changed exponentially. This ministerial churn has undermined our ability to build expertise and future capability, and raised doubts about the Government's commitment to this agenda.

"Prime Minister Scott Morrison wants Australia to be a 'leading digital nation by 2030'," Ms Cilento said.

"What is missing, however, is clarity about what this means, how we get there and how Australia can manage the opportunities and risks of emerging tech while retaining community support.

"Building and maintaining community trust around data and technology will be critical."

A new statutory office holder, a Chief Technologist – essentially, Australia's most senior technology expert and advisor – would:

- enable a long-term focus on emerging technologies;
- guide the development and implementation of digital and tech strategies;
- objectively communicate the opportunities, challenges and risks of emerging technologies; and

- ensure stable stewardship, align efforts and promote greater capability within government to respond to technology issues.

The role would clearly demonstrate Australia's commitment to the development and use of technology while maintaining public trust.

The Chief Technologist should also oversee the creation of robust and transparent technology assessments that would provide objective advice on emerging technologies, their potential impacts and policy implications.

"The transparent, independent advice we are calling for would help to increase understanding of critical data and tech issues among policy makers and the wider community," Ms Cilento said.

"They should also promote Australia's interests in international forums."

Other nations have already taken similar steps. Since 2009, the US Federal Chief Technology Officer (CTO) has shaped policy and driven the government's technology agenda. In Canada, the CTO provides government-wide vision and leadership on digital integration. In Israel, the CTO within the Israel Innovation Authority assesses proposals and formulates policy on companies engaged in R&D. The UK's Regulatory Horizons Council ensures regulation keeps up with innovation, safeguarding trust and safety.

The responsibility for building and retaining trust must be shared between the tech sector, business and the community. However, the Government must be ambitious on tech and innovation, and enable collaboration across states and territories.

Ensuring public trust is considered when technologies are developed means risks can be identified and addressed early. This is far more efficient than relying on retrospective or piecemeal regulation that can be hard to implement.

The COVID-19 experience has shown us that technology can keep our communities safe, reshape how we work and deliver productivity gains. A pre-COVID study by the CSIRO's Data61 and AlphaBeta found digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, could be worth \$315 billion to the Australian economy by 2028.

Introducing a Chief Technologist and new tech assessments will help us realise those gains.

*CEDA has an ongoing program of work on how technology can be designed, developed and used with trust in mind. We have today released a paper outlining these recommendations. Read the paper here.*

**Melinda Cilento is available for further comment and interviews.**

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CEDA – the Committee for Economic Development of Australia – is an independent, membership-based think tank. CEDA's purpose is to identify policy issues that matter for Australia's future and pursue solutions that deliver better economic and social outcomes for the greater good.



committee for economic development of australia

CEDA has almost 700 members including leading Australian businesses, community organisations, government departments and academic institutions. Our membership spans every state and territory.

CEDA was founded in 1960 by leading economist Sir Douglas Copland. His legacy of applying economic analysis to practical problems to aid the development of Australia continues to drive our work today.