Signal49
RESEARCH

Leadership Roundtable on Government Modernization

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LEADERS' ROUNDTABLE INSIGHTS

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A message from Susan Black and David McLaughlin

Turning ambition into action for Canada

The challenges facing Canada are complex, urgent, and deeply connected. Productivity and competitiveness are under pressure. Major infrastructure and national projects need to move faster. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence are reshaping how institutions work. Arctic and Northern sovereignty are becoming more central to Canada's future.

Across all these areas, one question keeps coming to the surface: How do we ensure Canada's governing institutions perform to meet the moment we are in?

That question is central to the Task Force for Modernizing Government, an independent group of public sector experts working to improve how the federal government functions so it can deliver better results for Canadians. Its work is focused on strengthening the institutions, capabilities, and ways of working needed to advance Canada's economic resilience, trust in democracy, and national sovereignty.

Signal49 Research partnered with the Task Force to convene this Leadership Roundtable on Government Modernization, bringing together the Task Force's public sector expertise and reform mandate with Signal49's experience in research, engagement, and cross-sector convening.

The roundtable engaged leaders from government, business, civil society, academia, and the not-for-profit sector for a practical and candid conversation about what it will take to modernize government in ways that better serve Canadians and strengthen the country's future.

The discussion was grounded in a shared recognition that Canada doesn't lack good ideas. We also have talent, expertise, ambition, and commitment. The harder challenge is implementation: How do we turn ideas into action, move with greater speed and focus, build the capacity to deliver, and sustain change long enough for it to take hold?

Government modernization can't be understood from a single vantage point. It affects how governments work, how businesses invest, how communities are served, how major projects move forward, and how Canada positions itself in a rapidly changing world.

A clear message emerged from the conversation: now is a moment for change. There is a strong appetite to think differently about how Canada delivers on the priorities that matter most. But modernization will require more than ambition: it will require focus, trust, coordination, capacity, and a willingness to work across traditional boundaries.

The pages that follow capture the key themes, insights, and practical considerations raised during the roundtable. They reflect a thoughtful and constructive discussion about where the barriers and opportunities lie and what needs to be true if Canada is going to deliver more effectively.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed their time, candour, and expertise. We hope this report helps carry the conversation forward and supports continued action toward the stronger, modernized government Canada needs.



Susan Black
President and CEO,
Signal49 Research



David McLaughlin
Executive Director,
Task Force for Modernizing Government



What we did

Before the roundtable event, the Task Force for Modernizing Government asked three thought leaders to develop scoping papers on its three priority areas: digital transformation and artificial intelligence, major projects and infrastructure, and Arctic and Northern sovereignty.

The purpose of these papers was to frame the key issues, surface early insights, and identify practical questions for further discussion. The roundtable used these papers as the starting point for a broader conversation.

After opening remarks from Signal49 Research and the Task Force, the thought leaders took part in a moderated panel discussion, offering participants a high-level overview of the scoping papers and highlighting common delivery challenges across the three priority areas.

The purpose of the panel wasn't to review each paper in detail, but rather to help participants think about the shared barriers that affect government delivery, including capacity, coordination, accountability, speed, trust, and the ability to sustain change over time.

Participants then engaged in facilitated roundtable discussions. The questions used in these sessions were designed to gather participants' reactions to the scoping papers and panel discussion, as well as insights drawn from their own experience and expertise. They were also intended to test whether the framing reflected participants' experiences, identify gaps or assumptions, and surface practical advice for the next phase of the Task Force's work. See Appendix A for more information on the methodology.



Setting the stage: Panel discussion

MODERATOR



Karen Myers
President and CEO, Blueprint

PANELISTS



MAJOR PROJECTS AND INFRASTRUCTURE
Riaz Kara, President and CEO, Pathfinder Policy Group



ARCTIC AND NORTHERN SOVEREIGNTY
Adam Lajeunesse, Associate Professor and Chair of the Public Policy and Governance Program, St. Francis Xavier University



DIGITAL GOVERNMENT AND AI
Sean Mullin, Senior Fellow, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto

The panel set the stage for the roundtable discussions by drawing out common themes across the Task Force's three priority areas. While each topic raised distinct issues, the panel discussion identified a shared challenge: Canada needs stronger capacity to act on its priorities.

It became clear that many barriers to delivery aren't about vision, but about implementation. The federal government often faces fragmented decision-making, unclear accountability, outdated systems, and gaps in specialized expertise. These challenges show up differently across policy areas, but they all affect its ability to deliver.

The discussion also highlighted the need to work across boundaries. Modernization will require improved coordination among departments, orders of government, Indigenous partners, the private sector, and civil society. No single institution can solve these challenges alone. Effective delivery depends on clearer roles, stronger partnerships, better information-sharing, and greater alignment around shared outcomes.

Capacity was another key theme that arose. Government needs the right people, systems, tools, and governance structures to manage complex files. This includes technical talent, project delivery expertise, data and digital infrastructure, policy and regulatory capability, and the ability to bring in external expertise when needed.

The panel made clear that modernization isn't just about moving faster; it's about delivering better. Success means making decisions with greater clarity, acting with more discipline, working with partners more effectively, and sustaining change over time.

What we heard

Participants used the roundtable discussions to test the ideas from the scoping papers against their own experience. Their input surfaced a set of practical themes about where delivery gets stuck, what needs more attention, and what could help government perform better.

Execution remains the central challenge.

Participants pointed to recurring barriers that make delivery difficult. These include unclear accountability, fragmented decision-making, limited capacity, and weak coordination among institutions and partners.

Institutional realities matter.

Participants emphasized that modernization must be grounded in how government works in practice. Rules, incentives, culture, leadership, and risk tolerance all shape whether people can act with clarity and confidence.

People and culture need more attention.

Talent, morale, labour relations, and public service culture were raised as important areas for further scrutiny. Participants cautioned that modernizing systems alone won't deliver results.

Existing levers should be examined first.

Participants warned against defaulting to new institutions or parallel systems. They suggested the Task Force look first at existing tools, networks, oversight bodies, and reform levers.

Learning should be grounded in real examples.

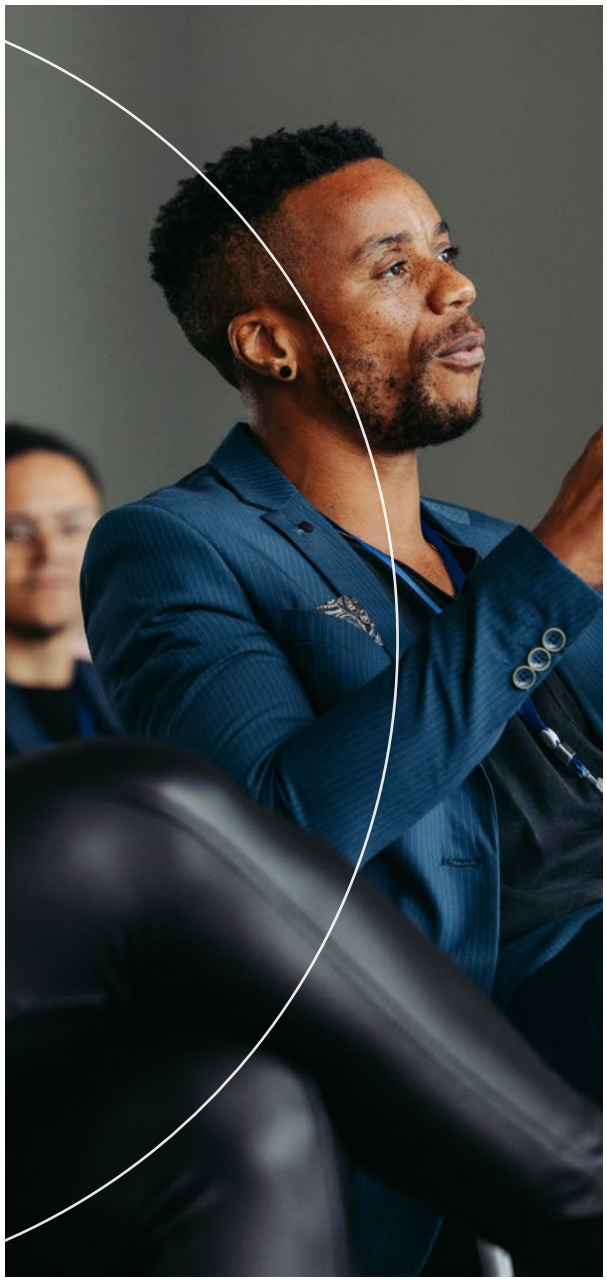
Participants encouraged the Task Force to study both successes and failures, including examples from crises, provinces and municipalities, Indigenous-led models, private sector partnerships, and international cases that can be adapted to Canada's context.

The next phase should focus on practical change.

Participants urged the Task Force to move from broad diagnosis to focused recommendations. The strongest opportunities are likely to be changes that improve execution, strengthen capability, support responsible risk-taking, and reduce unnecessary burden.

The sections that follow present these findings in more detail, organized around the six questions used to guide the roundtable discussions.

What problems need to be solved?



Execution is the core challenge.

Government often struggles to act on its priorities because the system isn't always set up to deliver at the speed, scale, or level of coordination required.

Accountability is often unclear.

Participants noted that responsibility is often spread across many departments, agencies, and partners. This can make it difficult to know who owns the final outcome. People may be accountable for parts of a process, but often no one is clearly responsible for delivery as a whole.

Decision-making is fragmented.

Many participants pointed to fragmented decision-making as a major barrier. Departments and agencies often work within their own mandates, timelines, and processes. This can slow progress and make it harder to solve problems across the federal government.

Federalism matters.

Participants stressed that modernization can't be treated as only a federal issue. Many priorities depend on provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous governments, industry, labour, and civil society. Federal recommendations need to align with the levers, knowledge, and capacity that exist across the country.

Indigenous partnership is critical.

Indigenous governments and communities must be engaged as partners. This is especially important for major projects, infrastructure, and Arctic and Northern sovereignty. Participants also noted that Indigenous communities need to be equipped with the capacity and resources to participate fully in decisions that affect them.

The public service needs stronger capacity.

Participants raised concerns about risk aversion, weak incentives, low morale, frequent movement of senior staff between jobs and departments, and over-reliance on consultants. These issues may signal deeper gaps in core skills and institutional knowledge.

What does practice tell us?

The findings reflect real experience.

Participants said the scoping papers and panel discussion reflected many challenges they've seen in practice. Government can set priorities and develop strategies, but often struggles to translate them into action.

The system can move quickly when conditions allow.

Several participants pointed to moments of crisis, including COVID-19, when government acted with speed and focus. This suggests the issue isn't that government can't deliver. Rather, the system often lacks the permissions and risk tolerance needed to deliver consistently.

Risk aversion shapes behaviour.

Participants noted that government is often designed to avoid mistakes rather than reward success. Public servants operate within legal, political, administrative, and cultural constraints. If those constraints reward caution and process compliance, the system will behave accordingly.

Feedback loops are weak.

Some participants noted that the federal government has fewer direct service relationships with people than provinces or municipalities have. This can make it harder to understand how policies, systems, or digital tools are experienced on the ground.

People matter as much as structures.

Strong governance is useful, but it can't compensate for skills gaps, low trust, or poor leadership. Participants emphasized the need to attract people with varied experience, retain those with deep expertise, and better use existing talent inside government.



What is missing or needs more scrutiny?

People and culture need more attention.

Participants felt the discussion needs to focus more on talent, culture, and institutional knowledge. Governance matters, but good governance won't be enough without the right people, skills, and leadership.

Institutional knowledge is fragile.

Frequent movement of public servants across departments can weaken expertise. People may leave a role just as they begin to understand it. This is especially challenging in complex areas such as the North, major project delivery, consultation, procurement, digital government, and national security.

Labour relations need to be part of the conversation.

Participants noted that public sector unions should be engaged in modernization efforts. Many prospective changes will affect jobs, classifications, skills, roles, and expectations. If unions aren't part of the conversation, implementation may be harder.

Federal, provincial, and territorial alignment needs more focus.

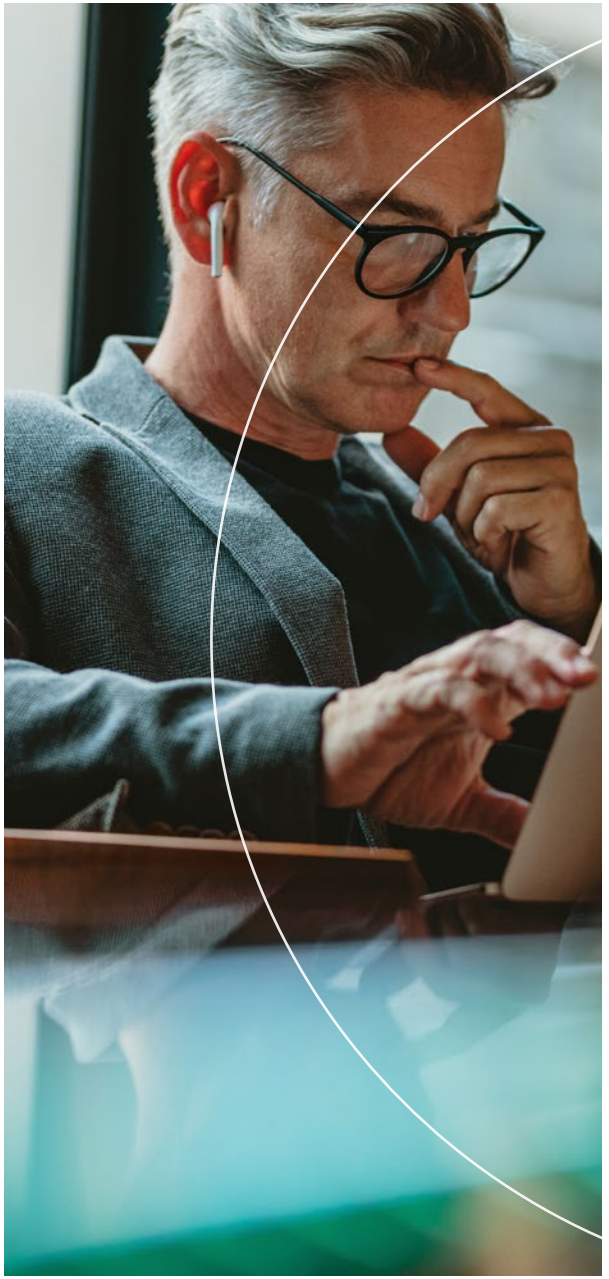
Many national priorities require alignment across orders of government. The Task Force should consider how the federal government can better align its goals with other governments.

New structures aren't always the answer.

Participants warned against assuming that new institutions or parallel systems will solve delivery problems. New bodies can create confusion, weaken accountability, and add more layers to an already complex system.

Work with what we have.

Participants suggested leveraging tools and institutions that already exist, including the Canada School of Public Service, the Association of Professional Executives, central agencies, deputy minister tables, oversight bodies, and current reformers inside government.



What examples can we learn from?



Study successes, not just failures.

Participants encouraged the Task Force to examine moments when government has delivered well. The key question isn't only what worked, but why it worked. What rules changed? What permissions were granted? Who had authority? What risks were accepted?

Learn from past crisis responses.

Moments such as COVID-19 showed that government can move quickly when there is clear urgency and decision-making conditions change. These examples can help identify what enables faster action and which practices and tactics can be applied outside crisis conditions.

Provinces and municipalities may offer useful lessons.

Participants noted that provinces and municipalities often have more direct service relationships with people. This can create stronger feedback loops and clearer pressure to deliver. Their experience may offer lessons on accountability, service delivery, digital tools, and public sector culture.

International comparisons should be used carefully.

Participants didn't reject learning from other countries, but they cautioned against copying models without appropriate translation. Canada's federal structure, legal environment, Indigenous rights framework, and public service traditions are distinct.

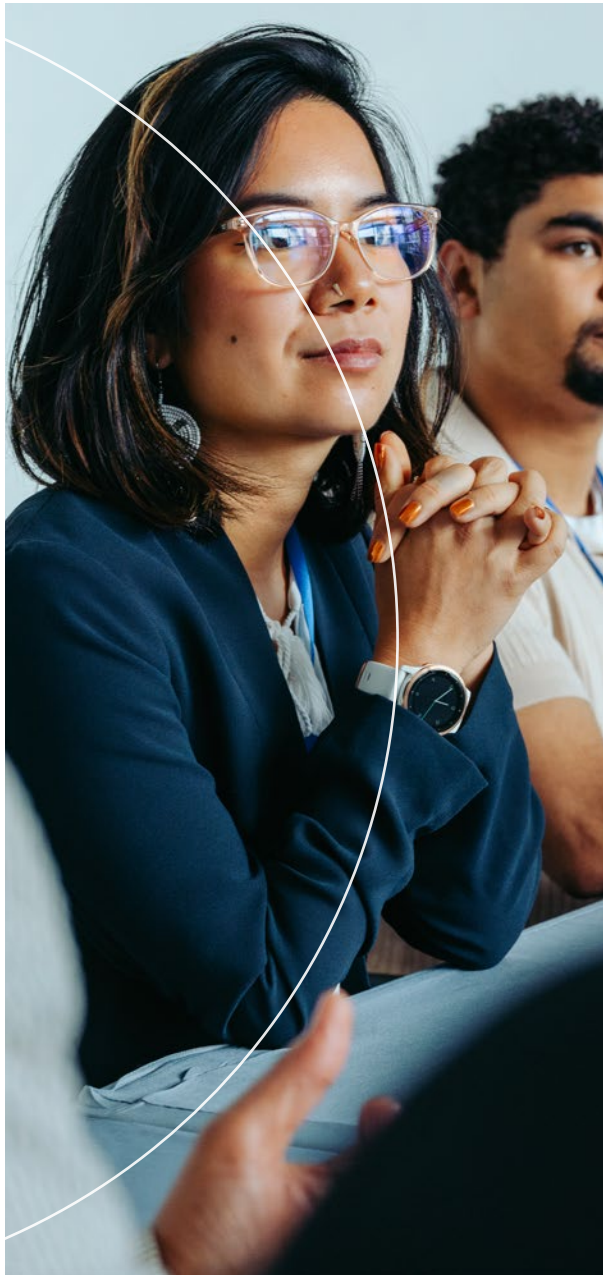
Private sector experience can help, but shouldn't be copied wholesale.

The private sector may offer useful lessons on incentives, talent, customer feedback, project delivery, and innovation, but government isn't the private sector. The goal should be adaptation, not imitation.

Indigenous-led models should be studied.

Participants highlighted the importance of learning from examples where Indigenous governments are involved early, have real decision-making power, and are part of long-term economic participation.

What should be prioritized next?



Focus on practical recommendations.

Participants urged the Task Force to avoid trying to solve everything at once. The work should focus on a small number of high-impact areas where change is possible and the Task Force can add clear value.

Strengthen talent and capability.

Participants emphasized the need to attract, retain, and develop people with the right skills. These include technical talent, project delivery expertise, regulatory expertise, commercial skills, consultation skills, data and digital capacity, and change leadership.

Support responsible risk-taking.

Risk aversion was seen as a major barrier to delivery. Participants called for a system that gives people permission to act, rewards good judgment, and allows public servants to challenge assumptions without fear.

Reduce unnecessary burdens.

Participants suggested looking at what government can stop doing, do less of, or delegate to technology. Reporting burden was raised as one example. Some processes may exist because of legislation, regulation, or habit, but lack clear value.

Use existing levers first.

Participants recommended using current institutions, training bodies, leadership networks, and oversight mechanisms before creating new systems. This may be faster and more effective.

What should the Task Force carry forward?

Modernization must be about delivery.

The strongest message was that modernization should focus on what needs to change so government can deliver more effectively. Participants didn't want the work to stop at broad statements about better governance, innovation, or coordination.

Canada has strengths, but they need to be organized better.

Participants recognized that Canada has talent, ideas, and ambition. The issue is how those strengths are organized. Too often, priorities are announced without the machinery needed to implement them.

Implementation is its own discipline.

Participants emphasized that delivery requires clear goals, strong leadership, the right talent, practical tools, and sustained attention. It also requires government that can learn, adapt, and sustain momentum long enough for change to take hold.

Trust is essential.

Modernization depends on building trust within government, between governments, and with Indigenous partners, the private sector, and individuals. Without trust, even strong ideas can stall.

The tone should be constructive.

Participants cautioned against simply criticizing the public service. Instead, the goal should be to help find a positive way forward. That includes identifying where government is already working well and where existing reformers within government can be supported.

Advice should be specific and usable.

Participants wanted the Task Force to provide advice that is grounded in practice. Its value will come from identifying where the system gets stuck and what can be done to unlock progress.



Appendix A

Methodology

This summary draws on data collected from an in-person event Signal49 Research held in partnership with the Task Force for Modernizing Government on June 23, 2026, at the University of Ottawa's Telfer Executive Campus.

Participation

This was an invite-only event. Signal49 Research and the Task Force developed the invitation list collaboratively, drawing on their networks and identifying leaders from government, business, civil society, academia, and the not-for-profit sector with relevant expertise or experience. Prospective participants were invited by email and registered in advance to attend. In total, 27 participants attended the event.

Discussion design and facilitation

The Task Force asked three thought leaders to develop scoping papers on its three priority areas: digital transformation and artificial intelligence, major projects and infrastructure, and Arctic and Northern sovereignty. One day before the event, registrants received a summary of the three scoping papers as optional pre-reading. This gave participants an opportunity to review the key issues and early insights before the roundtable discussions.

Those discussions were designed to gather practical feedback on the scoping papers and panel discussion and to surface insights from participants' own expertise and experience. The goal was to understand how the ideas presented reflected participants' experience, where there were gaps, and what advice should inform the next phase of the Task Force's work.

Participants took part in one of four breakout discussions. Each discussion was led by a facilitator and included between six and eight participants. Participants selected their rooms and weren't assigned to specific groups.

Each facilitator guided their group through the same set of core questions. This helped create consistency across the four rooms while still allowing each discussion to reflect the experience and expertise of the participants in that room.

The sessions were structured, but not rigid. Facilitators kept the discussion focused, ensured all participants had the opportunity to contribute, and encouraged open exchange. They also had flexibility to pursue relevant examples, concerns, or follow-up comments where these helped deepen the conversation.

Discussion questions

The discussions were organized around six core questions:

- Are the scoping papers framing the right problems?
- Do the research findings reflect your experience?
- What is missing, underdeveloped, or in need of further scrutiny?
- What examples should the Task Force be learning from?
- What should the Task Force prioritize as it moves forward?
- What is the most important message from this table?

Data capture

Each session was audio recorded through Microsoft Teams and transcribed using Teams transcription. This process yielded a total of 134 pages (54,150 words) of transcriptions from the roundtable discussions. Facilitators also took notes during the discussions to capture key themes, examples, questions, tensions, and recommendations.

Data analysis

The analysis drew on both the transcriptions and facilitator notes. This helped ensure the report reflected the discussions across all four rooms while also capturing themes and points of emphasis identified by facilitators during the sessions.

A hybrid analysis approach combined manual qualitative review with support from a generative AI tool operating in non-learning mode. The tool helped accelerate thematic coding and synthesis, while the research team reviewed and refined the findings to preserve the meaning, context, and richness of participants' contributions.

Limitations

The findings reflect the perspectives of the participants who attended the roundtable. They should not be read as a formal consensus or a representative survey of all stakeholders.

While every effort was made to capture the breadth and depth of the conversations, not all individual contributions could be reflected in this summary. Instead, this report presents key themes and representative ideas that emerged most prominently through the process.

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TASK FORCE for MODERNIZING GOVERNMENT

David McLaughlin, Executive Director of the Task Force for Modernizing Government, supported by **Susan Black**, President and CEO, PhD and **Heather McIntosh**, Director, Corporate Development, PhD, conceived of this first important roundtable event for the Task Force. **Heather McIntosh**, Director, Corporate Development, PhD led the execution of the event and this report.

Erin Rose, Senior Manager, Project Delivery and Corporate Initiatives, MA and **Leslie Twilley**, Chief Research Officer, PhD provided feedback on drafts of this report.

The following staff members provided facilitation and data collection support during the event:

- **Alan Chaffe**, Associate Director, Economic Research, PhD
- **Mike Burt**, Vice President, MBA
- **Jeremy Strachan**, Senior Research Associate, Education and Skills, PhD

The following staff members led and executed the convening efforts for this event:

- **Amanda Adderley**, Associate Director, Strategy and Operations
- **Eliza Solis-Maart**, Convening Manager, MSSc
- **Chantal Pye**, Senior Coordinator

The following staff members facilitated the marketing and promotional efforts for this event:

- **Kimberly Parsons**, Senior Manager, Marketing
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