

Minnesota's political leaders must embrace technology to foster economic and community revival

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Over the last few weeks, Minnesota has finally seen a decline in COVID-19 cases. In response to the improving situation, Gov. Tim Walz eased some statewide restrictions, giving us all hope that recovery is on the horizon. But many of the challenges faced last year remain, particularly for a small business community that has been battered by the pandemic. In order for a truly robust economic recovery to take place, our state's political leaders must embrace the new year as a fresh opportunity to recognize one of the most effective tools in keeping businesses and our economy alive – digital platforms.

As the co-founder of the Warehouse District Business Association, I witnessed firsthand the strength and resiliency of our local businesses this past year. When COVID-19 tore through our state and caused all nonessential stores and retailers to shut down, business owners were forced to adapt and implement creative solutions to survive. And one constant across these transformations and adjustments was technology. Digital platforms became essential for implementing appropriate safety protocols, communicating with employees and engaging with customers. From web servers and data storage clouds to payment processing software, these tools became vital for sustaining a company throughout the pandemic.

A true driving force

Minnesota's economy at large has also become increasingly diversified and resilient through technology. When I co-launched my first company, Radix, Inc., at age 21, we were one of the earliest businesses in the tech space. But now the sector has become a true driving force behind our state's economy, accounting for almost 10 percent of economic activity and employing more than 136,000 people in the Twin Cities alone. Innovation is growing in the state as well. The University of Minnesota hosts the largest statewide startup competition in the country, supporting more than 10,000 entrepreneurs and raising millions of dollars for founders across the state.

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Given the economic contributions technology has delivered for Minnesota, and the role that digital tools and services will no doubt play in building back our communities, one would think that our political leadership would embrace the sector with open arms. But it has been troubling to see some Minnesota policymakers adopt strong positions against the industry. As a hub for some of the nation's largest and most innovative sectors, from life sciences to agriculture, encouraging growth and investment should be the top priority. And as the pandemic continues to demonstrate the importance of digital infrastructure, the actions and rhetoric of our political leadership must reflect this dynamic.

Tech will play a fundamental role in recovery

As policymakers work through the legislative session, take up new positions in Congress, and chart priorities for the year ahead, it is critical they remember that technology saved many local businesses and will continue to play a fundamental role in our recovery at all levels of the economy.

Minnesota is, hopefully, closing in on the final months of COVID-19. Eligibility requirements for the vaccine have widened, cases are decreasing and

restrictions are lifting. In the upcoming months, we need to ensure that our communities are equipped with all the tools they need to recover – technology included. This is hardly the time to increase barriers for local businesses to access digital services, or to otherwise discourage the innovation that has delivered us through this pandemic so far. Supporting digital services and homegrown technology companies is necessary for the recovery of our communities and our economy.

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