



Digital participation amongst people with disabilities: Barriers that need to be overcome to increase digital participation

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Abstract

Digital participation among adults with disabilities is lower than it is among the general population. These findings suggest that there are four main barriers keeping people with disabilities from participating digitally: lack of access to computers, lack of opportunity to acquire digital skills, lack of motivation to engage with technology, and lack of trust towards technology and the internet.

This paper suggests that to improve digital participation of adults with disabilities the legislation relating to accessibility of websites needs to be enforced, subsidies and grants should be created to provide assistive technology for disabled people and people need to be educated about the benefits and dangers of digital participation. Further research is required to determine the most effective way to teach disabled people digital skills.

Keywords

Digital participation, digital inclusion, digital exclusion, access, digital skills, motivation

Key Points

- The cost of computers and of assistive technology can lead to digital exclusion for adults with disabilities. Grants/subsidies should be provided by the government.
- The internet is not accessible enough to meet the needs of people with disabilities and current legislation should be enforced.
- Disabled people may not have access to digital training opportunities. Digital skills trainers may not have the expertise to help them learn/ use assistive technology. Social carers should be trained to deliver training to disabled people.
- Ignorance of the benefits of digital participation and mistrusting the Internet means people do not want to participate digitally. People should be educated in this.

Background

Peoples' lives today are becoming more and more digitalised and many aspects of our day-to-day lives are taking place with computers and online. People are applying for jobs or attempting to claim their Universal Credit will need

an understanding of how to do online forms and how to use Information Communication Technology (ICT), which makes knowledge of the internet and ICT increasingly important. There is great emphasis on people learning appropriate

digital skills,¹ so individuals and groups in British society are not being left behind. The Carnegie UK Trust has deemed digital exclusion to be on par with social exclusion. There is no direct evidence between the digital and social exclusion yet, however the Carnegie UK Trust claims “digital participation is now an issue of social justice.”² The issue of digital participation is an important social issue in society today and has become a key issue for policy makers.

People with disabilities are some of the members of society most at risk of being digitally excluded at this present time. The Office of National Statistics in 2014 estimate that the 3.5 million disabled adults who had never used the internet represented 30% of the adult population who were disabled. Of those adults who reported no disability, 7% (3.0 million adults) had never used the Internet.³

The issue of raising digital participation is a pressing policy issue for the UK and Scottish governments and they have both introduced digital strategies to increase universal digital participation by 2020 and 2021 respectively. The UK government has highlighted four main barriers that prevent people going online and engaging with ICT. These four barriers include access to computers and the internet, acquiring the necessary digital skills, the motivation to engage with ICT and finally addressing the issue of trust people may have in regards to going online.⁴ The UK and Scottish Governments have both targeted universal digital participation in the coming years.⁵ The reality however is that there will always be a proportion of the population, whether through choice or through the severity of their disability, who will never engage fully with ICT or

go online. It is estimated that slightly less than 10 per cent of people will never fully participate in digital activities.⁶ This can depend on a number of factors: the lack of the digital skills, people being illiterate and people can also be kept from digital participation due to a disability.⁷

The aim of this research briefing is to identify the main barriers to those with disabilities and what potential policy solutions there are to increase digital participation for people with disabilities.

Findings

Access

Access is a key barrier for people with disabilities, predominately for those who have disabilities that require assistive equipment. Certain disabilities require assistive equipment, as it is integral to allow them to access ICT and in turn increase digital participation. Finance for assistive technology can be a barrier to accessing ICT as its cost is often very high. JAWS, a screen reader for the blind and partially sighted, can be as expensive as £700.⁸ The assistive technology required to create high-resolution graphics to aid people with autism can cost in the region of £3000.⁹ Also a tracker ball mouse for people with arthritis can cost someone between £15 and £50.¹⁰ The list could go on with regards to the costs of assistive equipment for people and their disabilities. Therefore subsidies or grants should be provided to those with disabilities to pay for the necessary assistive equipment.¹¹ The key issue of cost for assistive equipment needs to be addressed if there is to be a reduction in the rates of digital exclusion amongst people with disabilities.

Physical access to ICT and the internet is an additional barrier that exists for people with disabilities. A high number of websites do not match the standards needed to make the internet accessible for disabled people.¹² Legislation does exist to ensure websites are accessible to the disabled, however such legislation is being poorly enforced at this current time.¹³ The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) has four different categories of accessibility. In order of least to most accessible, the grades are as follows: no mark, A, AA and finally AAA.¹⁴ Websites must conform to the AA standard, however as of 2012, no government website fully conformed to the AA standard.¹⁵ There were actually 16 of the 350 government websites that did not even achieve the A standard in 2012.¹⁶ In addition only 5% of private websites reach the acquired standard of accessibility. It is important that legislation is properly enforced to ensure websites are designed to provide accessible websites for people with disabilities.¹⁷ The lack of knowledge of the legislation suggests that there will need to be cultural changes within web design.¹⁸ It would be of assistance to disabled users of ICT, if the government educated web designers from private websites about the needs of disabled users to ensure web design is inclusive and works for people with disabilities. There are certain settings that could be introduced to act as safeguards for disabled people to help enhance their enjoyment of going online. One example is websites placing safeguards for people with disabilities, such as guards to stop pages being lost from someone simply pressing the wrong key when they are online.¹⁹ A person's initial experience of digital participation is often a very

formative one. If a person has a good experience they are more likely to use the internet again, however bad experiences often discourage people from using the internet more frequently.²⁰ It is important therefore for ICT and the internet to be as accessible as possible for disabled people to increase the rates of digital participation.

For people with and without disabilities in Scotland, one of the main issues cited as a reason for not being digitally active when surveyed in 2014 by the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), was the issue of expense.²¹ These issues included the cost of buying a computer for their own homes.²² For those who may have a computer, the cost of the internet itself might prove too expensive.²³ It is not uncommon for people with disabilities to have lower incomes and therefore many will not prioritise their spending on computers or internet subscriptions.²⁴ Therefore a problem arises for people with disabilities, as they can often not afford the cost of the internet. This is in part due to the fact internet costs are packaged with phone line rental as well.²⁵ As of today there are limited internet providers offering the internet without the additional cost of a phone line. The solution could be for the internet to be offered as a sole internet package, excluding the additional costs of a telephone landline. Providing access outside the home is also not always feasible for people with certain disabilities who may require assistive equipment. There are a number of public spaces with computers and access to the internet, however this is not suitable for everyone. Certain people do not always have the necessary transport to easily access public spaces with computers.²⁶ In addition it can take time for public

access computers to be adapted to individuals' disabilities. Assistive equipment and software usually needs to be personalised to each individual so it makes it hard to operate in public spaces.²⁷ Therefore provision and policies will need to focus on the home rather than the public space.

Digital skills

After addressing the issue of access, equipping people with the necessary digital skills to operate well online is the next barrier to be overcome in increasing digital participation amongst people with disabilities. One of the reasons that digital participation tends to be lower amongst people with disabilities, in comparison to other groups in society, is people generally learn their ICT skills through networks of their peers and colleagues.²⁸ Disabled people, who may be excluded from employment, do not always acquire the digital skills from the work environment that others in society might. In addition, finding instructors with the necessary digital skills, as well as people with the acquired expertise to teach people with disabilities could be hard to find.²⁹ It could prove helpful if people's social carers had the ability to train people with disabilities in ICT. Greater digital participation could also assist staff of the National Health Service (NHS).³⁰ It could enhance communication between those with disabilities and the social carers.³¹ Disabled people with the knowledge in ICT could increase communication online and beyond their in person appointments and meetings with service providers. However the solution to providing people with digital skills is complicated. There is no universal approach that can be used to help

increase the levels of digital participation amongst people with disabilities. For many being taught from home in a one on one situation could be the most productive way of teaching disabled people digital skills. This would allow them to learn on their own computer with the correct adjustments already in place.ⁱ However, there is also need for peer and group learning for people with disabilities that do not require assistive equipment for ICT. Who teaches and how they teach is an issue that needs to be researched in greater depth.

Motivation and Trust

Motivation is a difficult barrier to overcome for people that are currently disengaged with ICT and the internet. The lack of motivation is often a key factor for people, disabled and non-disabled, for not digitally engaging and staying offline.ⁱⁱ Therefore, it is important to emphasise the potential benefits of digital participation. Many people do not see the reasons to use a computer or to go online. Encouraging disabled people online may not prove as big a barrier as it does for others who are digitally excluded in society. One of the main benefits of being digitally active is it can provide people with disabilities with a greater amount of social interaction.ⁱⁱⁱ According to research conducted by The Royal Society of Edinburgh, a key element for people going online is to use services such as Skype.^{iv} The internet can help disabled people engage in social networking and be able to have greater access to general information.^v The idea of getting people more connected and socially engaged could act as a very appealing factor to increasing numbers of disabled people's digital participation.

One final aspect that could encourage people to go online, whether they have disabilities or not, is the financial benefit of digital participation. One way that could entice disabled people online is the opportunity of saving them time and money. Those who are currently digitally excluded are estimated to be at a disadvantage of £560 per annum by not accessing the savings available to those already online.^{vi} The financial aspect highlights how disadvantaged people who are not online and it is important to encourage people online so the inequality does not continue between the digitally included and excluded. Changing people's attitudes is complicated and innovative ideas are needed to encourage people to use computers and the internet.^{vii} However the issue of trust is a concern for people who are currently digitally disengaged when putting personal data and completing financial transactions online.^{viii} This is as true for non-disabled non-users as for disabled. There needs to be education of the positives, as well as the negatives of digital belonging, to increase peoples' trust in going online. Governments must respect peoples' rights online to help build confidence^{ix} and increase rates of digital participation across disabled and non-disabled.

Conclusion

To conclude, if there is to be an increase in digital participation amongst people with disabilities the issue of finance has to be seriously addressed. The cost of ICT and the internet is often a barrier that prevents both the disabled and non-disabled digitally participating. For people with disabilities specifically there may need to be subsidies, to help people to pay for the assistive equipment and software to enable them to engage fully. In addition, it is important to investigate ways to best educate disabled people without the necessary digital skills. Greater research also needs to be conducted into which providers are best placed to educate and build the digital skills of people with disabilities. Finally, emphasising the computer and the internet as a tool to help people increase people's social interaction might prove an attractive proposition to encourage disabled people online and help increase the numbers digitally participating.

¹ Patrick Hogan, 'Bridging the Digital Divide', Citizens Advice Scotland, (2015), p5. www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/bridging_the_digital_divide_-_final.pdf

² Douglas White, "Digital Participation and Social Justice in Scotland", Carnegie UK Trust, September, (2016), p6.

³ Office of National Statistics (ONS): Internet

Access Quarterly Review, Q1 (2014) p5.

⁴ UK Government Policy Paper, December 2014, "Government Digital Inclusion Strategy" www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy

⁵ Ibid, Scottish Gov., (March 2011), "Scotland's Digital Future", www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/343733/0114331.pdf

⁶ UK Government Policy Paper, December 2014, “Government Digital Inclusion Strategy” www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Consumer Expert Group (CEG), “Consumer Expert Group report into the use of Internet by disabled people: barriers and solutions”, (October, 2009), p18. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/CEGreport-internet-and-disabled-access2009.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. p19. www.rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Digital-Report-High-Res-EQ5.pdf

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Dr. Chandrika Nath and Ned Yoxall, “ICT for Disabled People”, London: House of Commons, (May 2012), p3

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ RSE, p38. www.rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Digital-Report-High-Res-EQ5.pdf

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, p41.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sarah Beattie, “Offline and Left Behind: Digital Exclusion amongst CAB Clients”, Citizens Advice Bureau Scotland, p28. www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/OFFLINE%20AND%20LEFT%20BEHIND%20INDESIGN.pdf

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ CEG, p17.

²⁵ RSE, p33. www.rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Digital-Report-High-Res-EQ5.pdf

²⁶ Beattie, p31.

²⁷ CEG, p23.

²⁸ Nath and Yoxall, p3.

²⁹ CEG, p3.

³⁰ RSE, p60. www.rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Digital-Report-High-Res-EQ5.pdf

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