Manchester Metropolitan University

Digital Lifeline

Digital Lifeline:

The impact of the distribution of new digital devices during the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of people with learning disabilities

Key Research Findings and Recommendations

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Introduction

In February 2021, the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) initiated the Digital Lifeline Fund which, as an emergency response during the COVID-19 pandemic, gifted 5,500 people with learning disabilities Lenovo tablets, data, and digital skills support.

Concurrently, many social care and community organisations took steps to fund and support people with learning disabilities to access digital devices during the pandemic.

The Problem

Little is known about the longer-term impact of the widespread distribution of digital devices to people with learning disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our Research

The Digital Lifeline research project explored what difference rapidly distributed tablets given out during the Covid-19 pandemic have made to the lives of people with learning disabilities who received them; and to explore which packages of support were most effective in supporting people with learning disabilities to fully participate in their own digital lives.

Twelve participatory workshops were held with people with learning disabilities who received devices in the pandemic and with supporters of people with learning disabilities.

- In total **83** people attended a workshop.
- In addition, **160** people with learning disabilities completed an online survey.

ARC England

Good Things Foundation

LDE Learning Disability England

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Key Findings

1. Enthusiastic Digital Users

The digital devices distributed during the COVID-19 pandemic made a meaningful difference to many people's lives. People with learning disabilities have technology in their lives and are using it for positive ends and a wide variety of uses.

2. The Post-Pandemic Withdrawal and Deskilling

The pandemic acted as a forced accelerator for digital skills, but this has been followed by a significant withdrawal of both support and the routines that anchored digital participation during the pandemic.

3. The Interdependence of Digital Inclusion

Digital participation is not an individual achievement but an assemblage of support from other people, motivation, and access to the preferred technology. When people who can support are not available, digital participation quickly declines.

4. Different Devices for Different Needs

There was a clear mismatch between the hardware provided (tablets) and the hardware now being used in daily life (smartphones). Smartphones are now the main device for social connection. People often use multiple devices, choosing tablets for leisure activities at home, such as watching YouTube or playing games.

5. The Power of Necessity

Necessity was identified as a strong enabler of digital participation. People embraced digital technology when it helped them meet important needs e.g. connections with family during the pandemic. However, there was strong resentment expressed where people were being forced into formal systems like banking, benefits, and health apps that are inaccessible and confusing.

6. Underestimation, Gatekeeping and Online Safety

People with learning disabilities are frequently underestimated and assumed to be non-users by supporters, even when they are active internet users. Digital tools are sometimes being withheld because supporters believe the person they support won't manage or won't be safe – often this is based on their own fears about online safety.

7. Daily Practice, Fun Learning

Sustained digital participation for people with learning disabilities usually requires repeated learning, daily practice, fun reasons to engage and safe spaces where people can "practice, practice, practice" without the fear of breaking something or making a mistake.

8. Not All Digital Participation Looks The Same

There are vastly different ways that people with learning disabilities engage with technology. Some people have high level skills, others might be everyday users of smartphones, yet require consistent, trusted people to navigate more complex tasks. There are also those with profound and multiple learning disabilities for whom digital participation is about benefits facilitated entirely by others.

9. Supporting Aspirations for the Future

Despite the decline in use, there is a strong interest in getting better at using digital devices. The most popular way people want to improve is by learning from people who support them. YouTube was identified as an important support tool for learning as well as for entertainment. Support is required across people with learning disabilities and supporters alike around rapid change of the digital world.

Recommendations for Practitioners

- **Foster a Digital Culture:**
  Encourage a visible digital culture within organisations where experimentation is role-modelled and curiosity is encouraged rather than feared.
- **Challenge Gatekeeping:**
  Organisations must facilitate equality by addressing internal cultures where carers decline devices or Wi-Fi on a person's behalf because they believe the user "won't be safe" or "isn't interested".
- **Address Staff Turnover in Digital Support:**
  Ensure digital support continues when staff leave.
- **Upskill the Workforce:**
  Digital literacy should be a requirement in job descriptions for support staff, ensuring they have the competence to help users navigate daily digital challenges.
- **Build Confidence with Personal Hooks:**
  Use fun and creative activities (like photography, making videos, digital art, or gaming) to build motivation and confidence needed for digital use. Support should focus on showing possibilities (e.g., creative AI, photo editing) rather than just technical steps.

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