Disabled people crossing the digital divide: Supporting independence with digital skills in the community

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T4I Communication type: Knowledge Transfer

1. Overview
This presentation focuses on research undertaken with community organisations which support disabled people, to find out about the barriers to digital inclusion facing this audience. The research will inform a practical handbook to help such organisations get disabled people online.

Tinder Foundation manages the 5,000 strong UK online centres network which supports people to gain digital skills in communities across the country.

2. Background
12.6 million UK adults lack basic digital skills [1] and 5.3m have never been online [3]. Research shows that disabled people are among the most digitally excluded groups in the UK, with 25% of disabled adults having never used the Internet, compared to 10.2% of UK adults [2]. Lack of access is a key factor, with disabled people significantly less likely than non-disabled people to have internet access (65% compared to 88%) [2].

These statistics indicate there is a need for further resources to support organisations with the knowledge and best practice to help more disabled people benefit from digital skills and the Internet. Furthermore, the Government Digital Service Digital Inclusion Research Working Group (GDS RWG), of which Tinder Foundation is part, brings together representatives from academia, government, private sector organisations and charities to ascertain why certain segments of the UK population are offline and lack basic digital skills. GDS RWG has developed the 'Digital Inclusion Outcomes Framework' which highlighted a number of population segments needing focused support, including disabled people.

The Doing Digital Inclusion: Disability Handbook has been designed to help community organisations get disabled people online. It is a practical online resource which outlines common barriers disabled people face to learning basic digital skills and getting online, and presents advice on overcoming these barriers, including tips for engaging, recruiting and supporting disabled people in the community to gain digital skills.

The handbook links to delivery case studies from community organisations who already support disabled people to get online, and contains insights into how these organisations have overcome the challenges faced when trying to support disabled people with digital skills.

Anticipated primary users of the handbook include community organisations such as UK online centres, who support or would like to support disabled people with digital skill development, and disability support organisations for whom digital inclusion is not a big part of their remit. Secondary anticipated users include innovators designing technology solutions for disabled people and web developers working on ensuring their design solutions are accessible for all.

3. Methods
Community organisations in the UK online centres network have long expressed a desire to learn from others and understand and share best practice around digital inclusion. Tinder Foundation supports a Specialist Disability Network of 117 UK online centres with the expertise to share with other UK online centres.

A qualitative approach was taken to the research, involving semi-structured interviews with managers of UK online centres supporting disabled people, and focus groups with 40 people attending local disability groups. The handbook was reviewed by UK online centre managers in the Disability specialist and wider network, and disability academics.

3.1 Ethical statement
Appropriate ethical approval was in place.

4. Results
The Disability Handbook makes it clear that disabled people can face a number of barriers to getting online and learning basic digital skills, including:

- Websites and devices not accessible to all
- Financial constraints
- Insufficient space at or around a computer, including for Personal

Assistants, making it difficult for some disabled people to attend learning venues, and

- Reliance on proxy users who may themselves have poor digital skills.

The research also identified a number of delivery challenges, including digital inclusion practitioners' limited knowledge of accessible and adaptive IT equipment, digital not being a priority amongst disability service providers, and low digital skills amongst their staff.

In terms of engaging with those that could benefit from digital, some of the best practice emerging from the research includes finding a topic the individual has expressed an interest in, highlighting how the Internet can assist in daily tasks to encourage independence, and working in partnership and going to where your audience already is like Day Centres.

In terms of delivery, the case studies in the handbook highlight best practice, including:

- Making sure staff and volunteers are disability confident.
- Keeping learning informal and providing a relaxed and familiar environment in which people feel comfortable, safe and able to ask questions, and
- Empowering individuals to take charge of accessibility.

5. Discussion
The Doing Digital Inclusion: Disability Handbook is a new resource, but feedback so far from UK online centres and disability academics has been positive, including strong support for its barrier-focussed rather than impairment focussed content. One Learning and Development Manager at a UK online centre supporting disabled people said, "The Handbook will be of real benefit to Library Information staff and DWP staff as well as disability centres because it is to the point and backed up by facts." Since March 2015, Tinder Foundation have published six handbooks, which have been viewed online

3775 times. It is hoped that the Doing Digital Inclusion: Disability Handbook will have just as much reach, benefitting community and advocacy organisations, academic institutions and technology innovators.

6. Conclusion
Anecdotal feedback shows that handbooks are valued and the data show they are being seen. Tinder Foundation now want to measure the use and impact of the Disability Handbook in detail, to understand how we can improve this and similar resources for UK online centres in the future

7. References
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