Improving digital skills for employability

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Conclusions at a glance

Digital is changing our lives, our jobs, how we run our businesses and manage our money. This means that having the digital skills, motivation and confidence to use the internet safely is becoming essential for life and work.

This report summarises research exploring challenges for support to improve employability through digital skills for people facing significant disadvantage, and initial recommendations on how to overcome these.

- Effective provision addresses the holistic needs of individuals. Unemployed people may lack basic literacy and social confidence as well as digital literacy. Building motivation through longer, person-centred support is one of the most effective ways to help people develop digital skills.
- A strong 'ecosystem' of support is essential. Support with digital skills should be available locally wherever service users might need it. Jobcentres, housing associations, offender services, organisations supporting homeless people or care leavers are all critical to building area-based support for unemployed or underemployed people.
- First contact matters. High quality support, often at a point of crisis, establishes trust that can then build an ongoing relationship with clients.
- Standard, co-ordinated approaches to early assessment should mean engagement with one service leads on to whichever others are relevant.
- There are not enough routes to further learning and higher-skilled work. Jobseekers tend to end up in provision that helps them use digital to meet Jobcentre requirements and find work similar to previous jobs. There is little support for those in work or 'aftercare' following help to find work.
- Digital is not a bolt-on. Employa bility hinges upon a thorough understanding of digital skills. Support for employability and in-work progression should embed the development of digital skills and the motivation to use them.
- Digital skills open up many other aspects of everyday life. A more holistic approach to digital capability – which foregrounds confidence, curiosity, adaptability and problem solving – is arguably where the real and lasting benefits of developing digital skills lie.

Separate papers look at individual financial capability and support for small businesses, (with common themes and some overlap between the three). An overall summary setting out the wider recommendations is also available.

Introduction

Digitisation, automation and globalisation will continue to change the world of work. The ONS has reported that automation is set to impact large parts of the economy, with 1.5 million people or 7.4% of workers at high risk, the majority of these being women (70.2%) or younger people aged 20 to 24 years (ONS, 2019). This includes many low and middle-skilled roles with predictable tasks that are capable of standardisation. In addition, digital devices, platforms and content are ever changing and proliferating. People need to update their skills as much as they need to update their devices.

We must ensure that people from the most marginalised groups can be resilient in this digital economy. This means making sure they have the capability, confidence and curiosity to learn new digital skills, to apply them at work, and to keep on learning. Such 'self-efficacy' is central to developing the knowledge and skills needed to participate fully in the workforce.

This report looks at ways to support and improve economic participation for people who face significant disadvantage in the UK labour market, especially those who may be vulnerable to long-term unemployment. We also consider people who are working in low-skilled, low-paid and insecure work with limited opportunities for progression. Progression is important in reducing current high levels of in-work poverty, preventing future unemployment and boosting wellbeing.

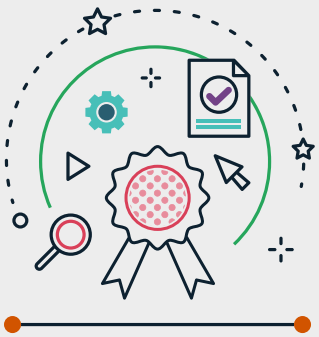
The report develops an initial understanding of the needs relating to digital skills for employability, the range of current activity and initiatives, the areas of best practice and gaps where more work could add value. Alongside this areas for policy and practice development are identified (which are expanded in the separate summary report).

The research purpose being to identify how best to:

- increase individuals' confidence and their digital 'self-efficacy' (that is, their motivation, autonomy and confidence in learning – and continuing to learn – about digital skills)
- develop the adaptive problem-solving skills that underpin the use of digital at work
- help people into employment and to progress within employment through the confident application of digital skills

With a focus on:

- people who are currently unemployed
- low-skilled, low-paid workers with low educational attainment
- workers in insecure employment, and in precarious industries or sectors at risk of automation/labour market change
- groups at particular risk of digital exclusion in the workplace.



1 | Five Essential Digital Skills for life and work

- Communicating
- Handling information and content
- Transacting
- Problem solving
- Being safe and legal online

Source: UK Essential Digital Skills Framework 2018

A 'digital mindset' is vital for employability

The government has published an 'essential digital skills framework' (see Box 1). But making people more digitally efficacious is about more than narrowly engaging with digital skills. It is about helping people into a position where they can use digital technology effectively and appropriately. This confidence to apply digital technology is more of a 'digital mindset' than a specific set of skills. With the growing complexity of systems, there is an increasing need for 'soft skills' that go beyond technical understanding and being able to navigate around certain applications. Transferrable digital skills and lifelong learning have become vital.

The 2019 Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index confirms the links between unemployment, low earnings and digital exclusion. The 2019 Index includes the first measure of the UK's revised 'Essential Digital Skills'. The report reveals how far and fast the goalposts are shifting around the level of digital skills now required for work. Even among those who actively use digital skills in a working environment, over half of respondents were found to lack the full range of essential digital skills for work (Lloyds 2019). The report also finds that those who have digital workplace skills earn on average £12,500 more per year than those who lack them; those earning more than £25,000 are much more likely to have digital workplace skills than those earning less than £11,499 (61% to 25%); and that unemployed people are much more likely to lack Essential Digital Skills for life than the UK average (36% vs. 22%) (Lloyds 2019). The report also reveals regional and sector differences - with employees from the manufacturing, construction, utilities and retail sectors as the least digitally skilled (Lloyds 2019).

There are 8 million working-age adults living in poverty across the UK (ONS, 2018). Of these, 5.4 million currently lack the skills to participate in the digital workplace (Lloyds, 2018).

These figures encompass significant geographical disparities in poverty and deprivation. Long-term unemployment continues to fall but some areas experience high levels and official figures may not account for 'hidden unemployment' (such as those who wish to work but are not claiming benefits). Even in areas with good digital skills on average, there is still a clear need for digital inclusion. Those who do not have digital skills and access are those most likely to be disadvantaged. Of those who don't use the internet, 90% are more likely to face challenges around unemployment, low income or low skills.
The proportion of working-age households in poverty where at least one adult is working has risen over the last two decades (JRF, 2017). Growth in employment in our study areas has often been in low-paid jobs with limited opportunities for progression. 'Low skills traps' are prevalent in certain sectors, such as retail or food services (Green, 2016). Our cross-area study showed there is strong competition for these jobs, but they are insecure, low-paid and limited. Zero-hours contracts and new welfare criteria have both created substantial in-work poverty in our study areas.

Changes to the benefits system have also caused deprivation in our study areas. The introduction of sanctions reduces or stops payments if claimants do not meet certain requirements. Where Universal Credit has been introduced, claimants face a five-week delay for the first payment. Universal Credit must be applied for online, and this has driven demand for digital support services.

In Scotland, Universal Credit Scottish choices has been rolled out, giving people a choice to receive Universal Credit twice a month (rather than monthly as in England) and to have the Universal Credit housing element paid directly to the individual's landlord.

Nuances of geographic payment models aside, it is clear that across the UK, digitisation of the benefits system has left claimants with poor digital skills or limited online access in urgent need of help to both to make claims and to meet the online job search requirements to avoid being sanctioned.

Support services are under strain

All this is driving a need for crisis services. But it is also diverting energy from longer-term employability support that could improve social mobility. Demand has increased at a time of reduced funding. All the providers in our four study areas reported a constant reduction in funding and resources, exacerbated by financial insecurity as previously 'steady' funding is reduced, cut or shortened.

Our cross-area studies revealed barriers between crisis and progression services. There is a disconnect between services which help people in acute crisis and those which help clients progress into work and qualifications. In particular, staff at Jobcentres do not always know individual clients or the local service landscape well enough to signpost people effectively to other support. Jobcentre requirements may assume clients have stable access to a certain level of resources, but this may not be checked with the individuals concerned.

Overall, there is a lack of local digital strategies. There is no resource to audit and organise the efforts of local providers.

Digital skills matter for the economy and for individuals

Low digital skills have been cited as a key reason for shortfalls in national productivity, alongside other factors such as poor quality management and low investment in R&D (CBI, 2016). Three types of problems historically associated with general skills and employment have resurfaced in relation to the more recent need for digital skills:

- Skills gap: Failings in secondary and further education cause widespread shortfalls in the basic skills of future employees
- Skills shortage: Rapid growth in certain sectors, low entry into certain degrees, and changing demographics cause a shortage of job-specific skills
- Skills mismatch: These in turn lead to the supply and the demand for skills being out of sync.

CEBR has estimated the value of corporate benefits by filling the digital skills shortage to be £1.5 billion by 2028 (CEBR, 2018). The government gains through increased income tax receipts from individuals having higher incomes and through increased National Insurance Contributions (NICs) from employers and employees.

For individuals, digital skills help beyond finding a job. Of those with zero digital skills, 46% earn less than £17,499 a year (Yates, 2017). Those with basic digital skills, however, could expect a lifetime increase of their average earnings of 2.8% (CEBR, 2018).

For adults, raising incomes has the most impact on boosting mental health and happiness (Cooper and Stewart, 2015). Material deprivation feeds into poor health. In turn, low wellbeing and mental health harm people's ability to find and keep jobs, especially young people. For children, household income impacts a wide range of outcomes. The lower down the income distribution, the bigger the impact is (Cooper and Stewart, 2013).

Employment matters for wellbeing. Some forms of temporary and insecure employment have negative effects. But overall having a job is good for wellbeing; having a quality job is even better. Being in a job with opportunities for progression can be important in itself. Good work is a primary driver for better health and wellbeing in employees (Waddell and Burton, 2006).

People need digital skills throughout their work journey

Jobseekers increasingly need digital skills to both look for and apply for work. For most jobseekers, welfare conditions and the Universal Credit system have made digital skills a necessity, both for finding work and for accessing support while seeking work or living on very low pay. While many jobs are still found through word of mouth and personal networks, digital talent platforms (such as LinkedIn), social media and online advertising are becoming more important.

Use of digital is expanding across sectors and businesses of all sizes. A growing number of entry-level or low-skilled occupations require some degree of confidence with digital. Digital skills can also improve integration into the workplace and bring increased job satisfaction through better access to information and learning opportunities and more efficient forms of communication.

Digital skills are increasingly needed for retaining and progressing at work, whether with the same employer, moving to a different employer, or moving across sectors. For some, this will be about their ability to use specific tools or software. More broadly, this will be about having the confidence to use digital to solve problems, communicate and collaborate. Understanding which skills are important and which are missing also allows individuals to be better managers of others and even to take up managing positions. Promotion and increased pay are also related to digital skills: digital skills carry a premium for wages and make it easier to obtain more generous performance rewards.

Digital skills on their own are not enough

Across all employers, expectations of digital skills are increasing. At the same time, many are becoming less confident that their business has the digital skills it needs. Research by the Federation of Small Businesses, for instance, found 22% of small businesses believed that their employees' lack of digital skills prevents their business from using digital effectively (FSB, 2017). There also appears to be a mismatch between employers' demand for basic digital skills and the supply of these skills through the education and training system (as noted above). Employers have cited a lack of basic IT skills in older recruits and poor numeracy for school and college leavers (CBI/Pearson, 2017).

However, evidence suggests that employers prioritise 'soft skills' (such as attitudes to work and communication skills) over basic technical skills when recruiting – especially with school or college leavers (CBI/Pearson, 2017). This matters. It suggests that:

- digital skills are necessary but not sufficient in themselves to gain work or improve economic inclusion
- the development of digital skills needs to run alongside the broader development of adaptive problem-solving and personal skills, which in turn enable people to empower themselves.

Digital exclusion is a complex journey

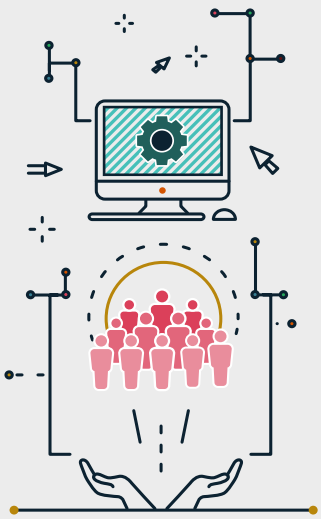
Many factors increase the risks of long-term unemployment and becoming stuck in low-skilled work, with limited opportunities to progress, as various studies in our literature review show. Where you live is a strong predictor. Certain locations are dominated by low-paid work, such as areas of industrial decline and some coastal towns.

Many marginalised individuals will have experienced challenging lives for a long time before accessing support. Those most vulnerable will experience some or all of economic exclusion, social exclusion and digital exclusion. These conditions are most likely to be affected by ethnicity, gender and age, and include those living in poverty, with a low income, with low educational attainment and skills, and living in deprived areas. People may experience complex and multiple disadvantages across different areas of their lives, for example, young care leavers and adults in contact with the criminal justice, substance misuse or homelessness systems.

Economic, social and digital exclusion are likely to create a number of psychological effects that further create vulnerability. Such feelings include a lack of confidence, resilience, trust, self-esteem, commitment, motivation, curiosity and self-empowerment. These negative feelings erect personal barriers including an unwillingness to access support, being time-poor, having a short-term focus and poor financial behaviours. These can severely impact individuals' participation in broader society and their ability to manage their money.

Events that may create a crisis or compound vulnerability and exclusion include job loss, redundancy, significant illness, relationship breakdown, bereavement, homelessness, high rent and debt, or the fear of these.

These factors interact in complex ways. Being in a low-skilled occupation correlates with long-term unemployment. Part-time workers have higher poverty rates, yet qualifications appear less effective in improving pay prospects than for full-time workers, reflecting links with other factors such as caring responsibilities. This underlines the complexity of improving employability for marginalised groups. Individuals require both specific kinds of social and practical support and holistic provision (see Box 2).



2 | What we mean by holistic support

Holistic support addresses **physical, mental, and emotional** needs to overcome social and economic exclusion; builds trust, confidence and self-efficacy; provides skills development and support tailored to the needs of individuals; and empowers people by motivating them to use their skills and knowledge in practice.

Holistic support might take the form of: hyperlocal provision in safe spaces; confidence building and crisis resolution; delivery by skilled staff and volunteers; addressing interpersonal skills; encouraging problem-solving.

Some groups are more at risk of digital exclusion

Digital and economic exclusion affects those with low income, low social capital, and poor digital skills. Various research studies in our literature review show that some groups are at high risk and require particular kinds of provision. These include:

- Young people: those in the 'NEET' group (not in education, employment or training), and care leavers
- Immigrants: refugees, asylum seekers, EU citizens, those who have never worked in the UK
- Those with health issues: disabled people, those with learning difficulties, those with mental health issues, those living with addiction
- Carers, including single parents
- Jobseekers who have been long-term unemployed
- Those in-work but in zero-hours contracts, entry-level jobs, older workers
- Traveller communities
- Those in acute circumstances – for example, ex-offenders, homeless people or those at risk of homelessness.

Our area-based research highlighted deeper problems for some groups:

- People in transition (such as losing a job or dealing with poor health) too often do not become visible or willing to engage with services until they reach crisis point.
- Young people clearly wanted to work, and often their education was at least adequate to meet local job opportunities. But there was still a disconnect between young people and the labour market. Young people may use 'digital' regularly but their skills are related to specific activities that may not translate into the workplace or constitute general digital awareness. Many did not know how to stay safe and secure online. Managing their online profile in terms of their employment prospects was a particular challenge. Young people from deprived areas are more likely to lack both the soft personal and digital skills required for work.
- LGBT young people were especially wary of providing personal information, fearing it might lead to discrimination and exposure.
- Migrants and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities could face difficulties seeking help or navigating between support services due to language barriers and a lack of knowledge of the UK social and support infrastructure. Even those who had lived in the UK for a long time could find this complex. Some, especially women, were unused to acting with autonomy.

People in low-paid work get less support
Compared with support for those in long-term unemployment, it is less clear where the responsibilities for supporting in-work progression in low-paid sectors should lie.

The case for employers to improve in-work training and progression often refers to reducing costs of staff turnover, improving staff engagement and making full use of skills, thereby enhancing productivity. However, low pay sectors are more likely to be characterised by temporary contracts, staff turnover and competition, so such investment is less attractive to employers.

There is some interest in local approaches to boosting skills and employer investment in training to circumvent some of these barriers. In particular, larger public sector employers such as local authorities are exploring how to invest in skills development of their own low-paid staff, recognising that the effects of such investment will be multiplied across the local region. (One example is Bradford Council's Workforce Development Service.)

But there is evidence of worrying declines in the provision of training by employers, especially in low-skilled roles. Access to apprenticeships also appears to be lower for people from BAME communities, disabled people and women.

People face many barriers to developing digital skills

Both the literature review and the cross area studies highlighted a range of individual and wider barriers that prevent disadvantaged adults of all ages from accessing, affording or benefiting from support aimed at developing their digital skills for work:

- Complex needs Some of the most economically excluded people may require support across several areas of their lives. Finding work or improving their job may not be their priority.
- Learner confidence Low self-efficacy, perhaps related to poor formal learning experiences or general life experience, affects people's confidence to learn new skills of any kind.
- Poor experience has lasting impact Negative experiences of support services discourage people from reengaging in future, and can taint perceptions of services in general. The more vulnerable the individual, and the greater their need for services, the less likely they are to engage beyond the mandated minimum or unless in extreme circumstances.
- Uncertainty about benefits A lack of clear, detailed information on the wider financial implications of changing jobs can make people risk-averse.
- Educational and functional skills Low literacy and, for some, limited English are themselves barriers to developing digital skills, engaging with programmes and getting work.
- Employability skills Attitudes to work and wider social and interpersonal skills, as well as limited understanding of workplaces and how labour markets work and a general lack of work experience may all be barriers.
- Personal aspirations Not everyone wants to progress in work, fearing it means working harder for little extra reward or brings a reduction in benefits. Some fear that increased business productivity overall may result in lower hours or redundancy.

Digital access is not universal

For those on low incomes, being unable to afford kit or connectivity limits their potential both to learn and to apply that learning. Smartphones are the most common form of accessing digital for many, as our cross area study confirmed. However, smartphones may not be suitable for job search, may be limited by restrictions on data allowances or on functionality, such as writing a CV. Some workshop participants said they only had an email address because it is required by the Universal Credit system.

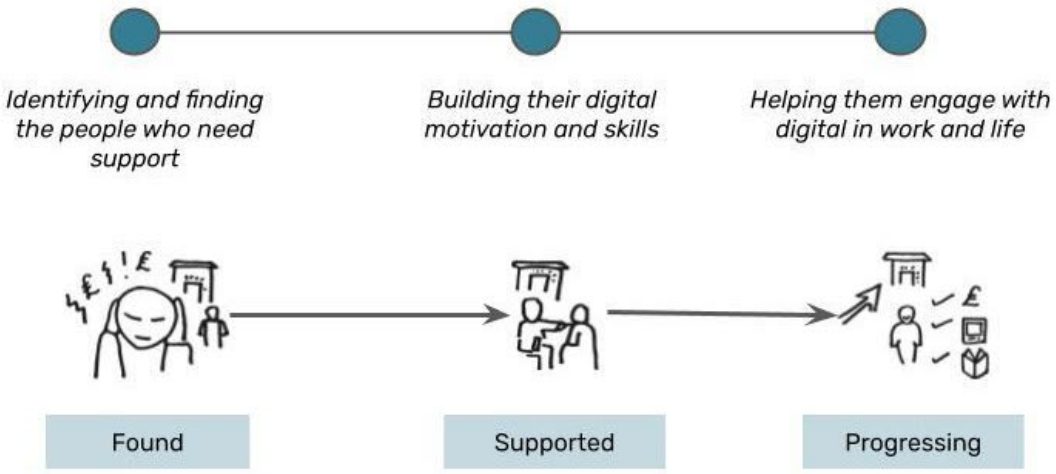
The increasing digitisation of services such as Universal Credit means that both information about services and applying for services or benefits may only be possible online. This clearly puts those who are 'offline' at a disadvantage. But it also transfers responsibility for interacting with government intermediaries directly onto claimants, requiring an additional layer of skill and confidence from them.

There are common components to effective support

From our research, we conclude that there are three stages where employability support needs to connect with individuals with low digital skills.

- Engagement The trigger for engaging with digital skills support is highly dependent on context. For each individual, it needs to reflect their personal circumstances, which can vary from day to day (see Figure 1).
- Delivery Flexibility and open-ended support that responds to individual needs is key.
- Outcome Beneficiaries of support need to be helped to understand that digital is the means to the end, not the end in itself.

Figure 1: The individual journey through support



A number of common themes come through the research and resonate with the experience of organisations currently working in this field.

- Addressing initial confidence and self-belief barriers at an early stage This is a recurring message through the research – applicable to both those who are long-term unemployed and those stuck in low-paid jobs. Taking the time to build people's self confidence appears to be an underrecognised but critical component of effective practice.
- Providing highly person-centred, flexible and individualised support This is a strong theme from the research and also from the work of local support organisations (especially St Giles Trust, Glasgow Life, Metropolitan Housing, and Bournemouth Churches Housing Association). This is about valuing people as unique individuals; recognising the wider realities, complexities and challenges that people face in their lives; and having the resources and flexibility to adapt and respond to people (including as their circumstances and their aspirations change). As local organisations commented, providing 1-to-1, personalised support is highly effective but costly. Ideally, each participant will have a single, dedicated key worker or adviser.
- People need longer-term support to help them on their employability journey Supporting people who have been long-term unemployed takes time. For example, St Giles Trust provides six months of personalised support to enable people to move forward. Following up and checking in with people once they have moved into work have also been found to be effective.
- Getting the practicalities right Ensuring engagement and attendance on courses can be challenging. This reflects the practical barriers that many people in the target groups face. Setting, location, travel, caring responsibilities, timing and frequency of sessions can all make it difficult for people to attend. This may be about limited availability (caring responsibilities or having more than one job can affect when people can engage), the cost and reliability of transport, or the costs, quality and availability of childcare. Support organisations identified these as everyday barriers that frequently get in the way of people progressing towards economic participation but where service responses are often ad hoc.
- Support with money and benefits A need for clear, detailed information on the impacts of changes in work status on benefits emerged as a key issue, especially for people already in low-paid work and looking for better work. This was apparent in a 2018 evaluation of the work of the Timewise Foundation, for example.

- Support with mental health Several projects – even those with no focus on supporting people with mental health conditions – identify mental health as an issue (including undiagnosed conditions). An OECD review on mental health and work identifies a number of components of effective practice including: systematic, timely and accurate identification of mental health problems; co-operation between employment and health services with more use of specialist mental health subcontractors; and strong relationships with employers to address mental health stigma (OECD, 2014).
- Skilled, supportive and engaging staff who make learning fun and relevant These attributes come through in a number of projects. A specific issue was the ability to put learning into context, so that participants can see it as immediately applicable to their lives and something they can take action on. This supports the idea that digital skills for work must also be seen as skills for everyday life. Evaluation of practice in English, maths and digital basic skills learning in apprenticeships and traineeship settings found that engaging with and listening to learners throughout helped keep learning relevant (Learning and Work Institute, 2017).
- Using mentoring and peer mentoring Some mentoring schemes for disadvantaged young people have had very impressive outcomes. This has come where mentoring has been well-supported, consistent and has enabled a genuine relationship to be built up over time. The MCR Pathways scheme in Glasgow, for example, provides mentoring support for disadvantaged young people in the care system that starts while they are still at school or college. Coaching and mentoring were also found to be effective in developing motivation and confidence, sustaining engagement in a learning or training programme, and enabling progression.

Different levels of providers face different challenges

Building motivation through longer, person-centred support is one of the most effective ways to help people develop their digital skills for work. The research highlighted issues for different levels of providers.

- Mainstream employability service providers Providers need the time, resource and capabilities to support people properly, including over longer time periods. Where mainstream providers lack the specialist knowledge or skills to meet someone's support needs, they need to know where to refer people. What works here are 'warm' referrals or handovers to other agencies. This requires good relationships (ideally partnerships or co-location) between providers, with everyone understanding where and how they fit in the local 'ecosystem' (or ecology) of support.
- Specialist employability service providers Many specialist providers are small charities or social enterprises, and may lack digital skills and confidence themselves, hindering their ability to help clients. Like mainstream providers, their approach to digital skills for work may be too narrow; they may not have the skills and time to blend digital learning into their other support; they may not have resources or funding flexibility to provide the holistic and personalised support to the level needed.
- Providers of training skills It can be challenging to provide training that is appropriate for people with multiple disadvantage, who may have had poor experiences of formal learning, and may not be able to commit to regular sessions. Specialist knowledge, skills and/or the relationships for appropriate 'warm' referrals to specialist support are likely to be required. A potential barrier is that training is focused too narrowly on job search or CVs, or use of work IT applications, and fails to make learning engaging, relevant and immediately applicable to people's lives.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- Commissioners of employment services
  At all levels, government commissioners of employment services need to give attention to digital skills, alongside wider employability and basic skills. Outcomes should focus on improvements in self-efficacy, learner confidence and individual motivation to use digital to progress to personal goals, in everyday life as well as work.

New approaches could bring services together

However, it is the way in which organisations work with others, through a collaborative 'ecosystem' approach, that can have a lasting positive impact on people's lives. This is particularly true when funding and resources are limited. The cross-area study produced a number of practical steps as recommendations.

- Recruit a 'Community Connector'. One organisation can act as a Community Connector, responsible for establishing communications and brokering partnerships between other local providers, and being the driving force for creating an integrated local support network. The Connector would be at the forefront of designing effective and replicable ways of embedding digital throughout support journeys, and responsible for sharing best practice with other areas.
- Embed digital in acute support services. The organisations with the best digital offer are not always the best at engaging those in most need, and vice versa. The Community Connector role will make it possible to take the best local digital practice and replicate it throughout each area's support network.
- Conduct a comprehensive audit of local provision and assets to identify potential partnerships, referral pathways and underused assets.
- Work with housing associations. Workshops, stakeholder interviews and survey data all indicated that housing associations have the potential to provide services, including for those who are not their own tenants. They are often already involved in offering employability support. They are also generally large, well-connected organisations, with high levels of digital practice and with existing infrastructure and resources that could be expanded to increase capacity.
- Create consistent approaches to engagement and 'triage'. To make the most of the first point of contact, the Community Connector should work with providers to co-create a cross-area model and tools for triage to assess needs and referral. This approach will ensure that needs and aspirations are identified, and a support journey mutually agreed, as soon as possible after someone engages with a service. Effective tracking and handover between agencies is essential, in order to avoid people dropping out and to break down the barrier between crisis and progression services.
- Measure integration. Evaluation should focus on measures that demonstrate the development of an integrated local ecosystem. This would include higher levels of progression from crisis support to further learning and employment outcomes, reduction (rather than resolution) of crises, and qualitative data from providers on how their services and their clients have benefited from integration.
- Measure digital outcomes. Practitioners across all areas need to use standardised digital outcomes so as to generate comparable data, and demonstrate the impact of integrated support across a whole area.
- Provide appropriate funding. Integration of services is a long-term vision and requires a long-term investment. Guaranteed, multi-year funding with central co-ordination gives providers the time to adopt new ways of working together, and reduces the administrative burden and distraction of constantly looking for new sources of sustainability. Workshop participants also emphasised the need for funders to appreciate and accept lower levels of 'quantity targets', especially in the early stages of delivery, when attention needed to be focused on set-up.

There is scope for development and innovation

It is clear that there is more to do in integrating digital skills into holistic support for employability and progression. Through our research and our interviews with local support organisations (City Gateway, Metropolitan Housing, St Giles Trust, Bournemouth Churches Housing Association and Glasgow Life) we have identified a number of areas that need offer scope for further development:

- Fully integrating digital skills into employability programmes, both to fulfil practical requirements (such as uploading a CV, applying for jobs online), and as part of building personal resilience and the ability to adapt in a digital economy.
- Ensuring the journey to employment is joined up, by understanding what employers want and what motivates them, and by engaging and partnering with them as a critical part of the employment and progression pathway.
- Focusing on tackling lack of basic digital skills and confidence as barriers to employment, through working in partnership with existing (national and local) practice and programmes, and maximising new opportunities.
- Leveraging Universal Credit as an opportunity to engage with digital, and a stage in a digital social inclusion journey.
- Improving local support ecosystems and creating pathways of support that work for people with complex needs, including being realistic about and demonstrating the flexible and long-term 1-to-1 support needed to be effective and inclusive.
- Ensuring that there is local support for digital skills which is easy to access in communities (community learning networks, place-based partnerships).
- Finding ways to overcome the competition between support organisations which some funding application processes have created.
- Designing approaches that address some of the practical barriers, such as transport and time constraints, that prevent people engaging in the first place and/or staying engaged.

Conclusion

There is a clear and practical need for people to acquire the digital literacy expected to find and keep a job – reflecting employer and consumer demands, and requirements for more entry and low-level jobs. More importantly, there is a growing need to enable people to build their personal resilience in a digital economy – their ability to navigate the labour market and 'survive and thrive', enhancing their economic participation alongside their social and civic participation.

This more holistic approach to digital capability – which foregrounds confidence, curiosity, adaptability and problem solving – is arguably where the real and lasting benefits of developing digital skills for employability lie for people who are economically excluded.

3 | Engaging time-poor people

Timewise Foundation ran an earning progression trial with 102 working parents on low income. A welcoming letter which defined the support on offer and what people could expect to achieve was more effective than community outreach or engagement through employers. Time-poor working parents generally wanted to be engaged or to receive information outside working hours.

Support must embed digital – it's not a bolt-on

Employability hinges upon a thorough understanding of digital skills. The application of digital skills will help people thrive and progress in the workplace and be more confident and successful in finding and applying for work. Employability support and support for in-work progression should embed the development of digital skills and the motivation to use them. This support should be provided for: those who are low-skilled, low-paid and in insecure employment; people with low educational attainment; workers in precarious industries, sectors at risk of automation/ labour market changes, especially older workers; entry-level workers; and jobseekers.

But digital skills provision is not just important for bringing economic, educational, and wellbeing benefits. They may also remove barriers across many other aspects of everyday life – including social, civic, and creative development. Digital workplace skills should be embedded in a broader, lifelong process. For digital support to be lastingly beneficial it must operate across contexts and provide access to positive social surroundings and experiences.

Effective provision understands and addresses the holistic needs of individuals

Digital skills should be framed in relation to social inclusion and education. Unemployed people may lack basic literacy and social confidence as well as digital literacy. The characteristics are interconnected and are best addressed by hyperlocal interventions, which engage people 'where they are' and can get to their needs more directly than blanket initiatives. Services must be person-centred, flexible and motivational.

Interventions to improve employability need to take account of the interactions between individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors. An understanding of the local 'ecosystem' of support needs to be interwoven with understanding of the local economy, employers and the supply of and demand for skills. Without this, and without co-ordination and connections between key players, any support with skills development may have limited effectiveness in changing lives.

First contact matters

Local organisations often engage with people at a point of crisis when the need for digital skills and support becomes apparent. Crisis resolution establishes trust with a client that can then be built on to provide ongoing support and resolve underlying issues. Gaps in the early stages of the support journey are especially significant for employability. Current jobseekers tend to end up in provision that focuses on helping them to meet the terms set by their Jobcentre and finding and applying for work at the same level to that they may have done before. There are not enough routes to further learning and higher-skilled work. There is also little support for those in established work or 'aftercare' following help to find work: providers interviewed thought this support was important, but it was rarely funded.

Co-ordinating support services at the area level is vital to improve the early stages of interventions: engagement with one service should lead to engagement with whichever others are relevant, through a standard approach to assessing and triaging needs. Without improvements across whole areas, using one service will not translate into a broader support journey that increases long-term independence and resilience.

A strong 'ecosystem' of support is essential

A cross-area basic digital skills offer should be available wherever service users might need it, with pathways to more formal learning. Individuals will normally need the support of a range of services that understand and can respond to their needs. Referrals and connection between these services is critically important. This depends on a strongly functioning local 'ecosystem' of support with productive relationship between intermediaries. What works here are 'warm' referrals or handovers to other agencies. These require good relationships between providers – ideally bound in through partnership working or co-location, with everyone understanding where and how they fit in.

Key organisations, such as Jobcentres, housing associations, offender services, organisations supporting homeless people or care leavers are all critical to building area-based support for unemployed or underemployed people.

About the research

In 2018, Good Things Foundation began an intensive piece of research to understand the current UK digital skills landscape and the people and businesses that can benefit from digital skills support to improve their participation in the economy; to map gaps in provision; and to identify the key features of best practice that can be tested and scaled.

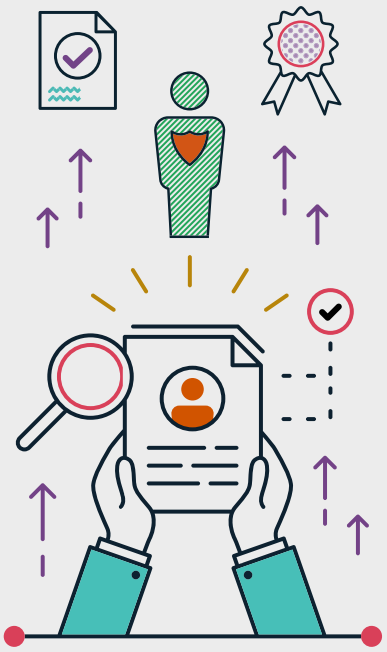
The Good Things Foundation research team undertook an extensive literature review of academic, policy and practice evidence; analysed key quantitative datasets; and undertook semi-structured, qualitative interviews with academics, innovation foundations, policy makers and support organisations. An important part of the project was a study across four areas.

The four areas in the study

The research engaged with practitioners through workshops, a survey and stakeholder interviews, and with service users through focus groups and interviews.

Each area had different priority audiences for digital skills support.

- Bournemouth: digitally excluded Universal Credit claimants; social housing tenants struggling with rent; people in unstable circumstances related to substance abuse, homelessness and mental health; older jobseekers in a competitive market.
- Edinburgh: young people transitioning to independent living; limited users of the internet; people who face multiple deprivation in particular areas of the city.
- Glasgow: migrants and BAME groups (and those for whom English is a second language); young people; people living in deprived areas of the city; unemployed people needing support with job seeking; people in low-paid, insecure jobs who have low digital skills.
- Tower Hamlets and Hackney, and Newham boroughs, London: women and working-age mothers from the Bengali community; those leaving education but not realising their potential in the job market (many from BAME communities); people in in-work poverty; private renters; homeless people, rough sleepers and people in temporary accommodation; unemployed adults with disabilities or long-term conditions.



4 | Addressing low-skills traps in local and regional economies

When Carolyn was unexpectedly made redundant, she knew she'd have to apply for a new job online but felt her skills weren't up to scratch.

"I was useless. I didn't know how to turn a computer on, never mind do anything. I had to ask my children to help me get set up and do job searches. I'd find myself waiting for them to come home [from school] so I could start searching."

Carolyn started visiting the Jobcentre and, through a personal contact, signed up for digital skills and GCSE maths at Kensington Community Learning Centre. Carolyn also volunteered to help out on reception and at the craft class.

"The people working here, in such a short space of time, taught me to use the computer. It was scary but I picked it up pretty easily – just basic skills on the computer. Nothing fantastic because I'm not that way inclined on tech stuff!"

Carolyn successfully applied for a cleaning job and is now doing a job she loves.

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DO YOU HAVE
CHILDREN AGED 0-5?

Good Things Foundation is the UK's leading digital inclusion charity. It supports people to grow their essential digital skills to overcome social challenges.

The JPMorgan Chase Foundation works in conjunction with J.P. Morgan to drive inclusive economic growth through the dispersal of charitable grants to non-profit organizations across the U.S and in 40 countries worldwide. Annually, the foundation and bank give approximately $250 million towards programs in four priority areas: Jobs & Skills, Small Business Expansion, Financial Health and Neighbourhood Revitalization (U.S Only) and often comprise aspects of employee engagement and volunteering, which are key to the firm's culture of corporate citizenship. Outside of the United States, philanthropic grants are made, in areas where J.P. Morgan has a presence, by programme officers covering Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA), Latin America (LATAM) and Asia and the Pacific region (APAC).

About this report

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The research project was led by Dr Alice Mathers, with Tom French, Natasha Munoz, Dr Laurence Piercy, Lauren Quinn, Jake Shepherd, James Richardson, and Dr Emma Stone at Good Things Foundation. Research in Scotland was supported by Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations, and in Newham by Community Links. An overall summary report and separate reports on financial capability and small businesses are available on the Good Things Foundation website. The small business research was supported by consultant, Anthony Impey MBE (Optimity).

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