Tackling the Digital Divide: 
The Shift from Access to Capacity 

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ABSTRACT

A focus of daily life in the UK now revolves around the adoption of technology and the impact of Internet based technology raises issues of the digital divide, knowledge divide, social empowerment and socio economic effects. This paper focuses on the impact of the UK government’s policy, ‘digital by default’, on individuals with limited IT skills living in an area of deprivation. Following a review of prior research, the paper analyses data from semi structured interviews with progression support workers in their roles supporting individuals in their use of computers to find employment. Research results identify barriers inhibiting individuals from using IT and the discussion reflects whether the inclusion of concepts of Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations theory into the design of the ‘digital by default’ policy has the potential to address the digital divide. The Conclusion draws on the research results to recommend a revised policy strategy.

KEYWORDS: Digital Capacity, Digital Divide, Policy, Social Exclusion, Strategic Computer Use

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the aspect of UK policy, ‘digital by default’, which requires individuals who need access to services to interact with computers to achieve a goal, in this case employment. The focus of this paper is to identify barriers to the strategic use of computers to enhance life chances through employment. It supports the notion that digital exclusion impacts on socio-economic equality and recommends strategies based on Rogers’ Diffusion Of Innovations theory (2003) to address those barriers. The paper posits that the inclusion of concepts from Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations theory (2003) into the design of the policy would address issues impacting on individuals’ skills/motivation to use computers. The assumption within Rogers’ (2003) theory holds that it is possible to alter voluntary innovation adoption behaviour to enhance diffusion of an innovation.
In 2012 the UK Coalition government introduced the policy ‘digital by default’, a strategy designed to provide transactional digital services that are clear and convenient through one government portal. This ‘digital by default’ programme is supplemented by ‘digital assistance’ a more conventional means of communication for those unable/unwilling to use digital methods (Government Digital Strategy, 2012). A major part of this strategy is Universal Jobmatch where clients are required to search for employment and track their job seeking activities on-line in order to qualify for benefit payments. There is also the move to a new benefits system, Universal Credit, a reform of the welfare payments system designed to simplify the system for people in and out of work (Shelter 2012). New claimants will be expected to claim and manage their accounts online. It is planned that new claimants will begin to claim from October 2013 and existing claimants will be phased onto the new system by 2017 (DWP, 2012). The expansion of the full Universal Credit to the north west of England will begin in June 2014 and in the area of the research, on September 15th, 2014. It will gradually involve all the job centres before being rolled out to 1 in 8 job centre across the country (DWP, 2014).

A primary concern as this radical policy is implemented centres on the claimants’ capacity to use technology, as the use of alternative services to help those unable to access online services will be kept to a minimum (Rotik & Perry, 2012; Welfare Reform Bill Universal Credit Equality Impact Assessment, 2011). The social impact of the new policy has the potential to exacerbate the social exclusion aspect of the digital divide due to the difference in individuals’ IT skills levels.

This research was underpinned by a review of prior research to identify issues inhibiting the use of computers. The empirical phase analysed issues from the perspective of progression support workers tackling deprivation by offering advice/guidance helping individuals to find employment through the use of IT. These respondents are based in Skelmersdale, Lancashire. It was a small mining town until the establishment of the New Town in 1961 designed to accommodate population overspill from Liverpool and Merseyside. It is now the largest and most densely populated settlement in the borough of West Lancashire, with a population of almost 41,000 in 2011. However, the town has not reached its originally planned size of 80,000 (West Lancashire Highways Master Plan, 2014). It is a significant ‘hot spot’ of deprivation, being the most deprived area in the borough of West Lancashire with 14 of its 23 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) featuring in the top 20% most deprived areas of the country (CLG, 2010). There is a link between digital engagement and material deprivation with distinct regional variations which have implications for digital policy implementation. While deprivation is not a static state, digital exclusion impacts on access to services (Longley & Singleton, 2009). The respondents deal daily with difficulties faced by claimants in using computers to search for employment. This paper suggests that concepts from Rogers’ theory (2003) once reflected in a revised policy design may offer a solution to barriers impacting on the acquisition of basic IT skills.

The structure is a follows, the next section analyses the UK government policy shift to digital communication discussing societal differences in capacity to use IT. The third section analyses prior research to identify issues impacting on the acceptance of digital technology to search for employment/access benefits. The fourth section discusses Rogers’ theoretical concepts that influence individual adoption of new practices. The following section discusses the methodological approach to this research and the sixth section discusses the research results. The results identify main barriers impacting on individuals as they are faced with the requirement to learn basic IT. Section seven analyses how Rogers’ constructs are reflected in the implementation of ‘digital by default’. The penultimate section, discusses issues arising from the results emphasising the need for support in this area to enable strategic computer use. It suggests ways in which Rogers’ concepts are reflected in the requirement to digitally search for employment. The Conclusion identifies an unintentional consequence of the digital policy and drawing on Rogers’ (2003) concepts suggests a way in which its delivery could be streamlined.
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