Medici Evidence Digest #6:

People with disabilities

Context

The term disability describes a broad range of physical, intellectual and developmental challenges which individuals can face. According to the World Health Organisation, more than a billion people (15% of the world's population) have a disability, and 'across the world, people with disabilities have poorer health outcomes, lower education achievements, less economic participation and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities.' The latest (2020) data from Eurostat show there are 112 million people – 25% of the entire EU population – who present with some form of disability. Comprehensive data on digital inclusion and disability is difficult to obtain for the EU as a whole. However, the evidence suggests that only around half the population of people with disabilities use the internet regularly (Academic Network of European Disability, 2019; EU-SILC, 2018).

As an example, the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) data tells us that 22% of disabled adults have never used the internet (compared to 9% of the adult population as a whole) and that social class and disability compound one another. The 2019 Consumer Digital Index shows that people with a disability are 35% less likely to have essential digital skills for life. Whether or not a disabled person is able to participate in society is highly dependent on their physical environment and the accessibility of the tools on offer.

Defining Digital Inclusion

According to the European Commission, Digital Inclusion is defined as:

'ways to ensure that everybody can contribute to and benefit from the digital economy and society'. [1]

The European Commission, and most EU Member States, typically shape their Digital Inclusion policy in terms of three key intervention areas:

- Connectivity: access to the internet through broadband, wi-fi and mobile.
- Usage capability: the acquisition of digital competences so people can use digital devices efficiently and effectively.
- Quality of use: the design of services so they meet all user needs, including the needs of people who are vulnerable.

Good practices for people with disabilities

Over a quarter of cases in the MEDICI Catalogue (84) impact disabled people in some way, however less than 6% specifically target this group. Of these 16 cases, only 1 is categorised as 'Cluster C' (highly replicable) with most of the others categorised as 'Cluster A' (promising and well-prepared). Almost half of these cases work with people with intellectual developmental disabilities, with the remaining split equally between sensory loss and disability in general.

Of the 84 cases tackling Digital Exclusion and disabled people, over half are in the UK. According to the Family Resources Survey 2018/19 (Department for Work and Pensions), there are 14.1 million disabled people in the UK; 8% of children are disabled; 19% of working age adults are disabled; 44% of pension age adults are disabled. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Labour Force Survey April to June 2020, disabled people are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people.

[1] Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions A Digital Single Market Strategy for Europe. COM/2015/0192 final

The proportion of disabled people (13.3%) who report feeling lonely "often or always" is almost four times that of non-disabled people (3.4%), with the greatest disparity for young adults, aged 16 to 24 years old.[2] With the number of disabled people rising due to an aging population and an increase in chronic conditions, alongside an ever-increasing move towards a fully digital world, it is growing increasingly important that people with disabilities are digitally included. According to the Good Things Foundation, a lack of digital skills can lead to increased loneliness and social isolation; as those who are already disadvantaged are often more likely to experience digital exclusion, this can further widen the social inequality gap. Of the 16 cases specifically targeting disabled people, the most successful interventions were those that worked closely and actively with participants to respond to their needs and fully understand the wide range of complex and individual demands both their disability and personal preferences demanded.

Examples of replicable practices

Able to Include (Cluster C: Highly Replicable)

There are about 2 million people in Europe with severe intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) and they represent one of the most disadvantaged social groups. People with IDD need additional assistance throughout their lives and ICT can be used to give them greater independence. The Able to Include project sought to improve the living conditions of people with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD). It was delivered across Belgium, Ireland, the UK and Spain.

The project integrated a set of existing technologies to create an open-source and context aware accessibility layer which, when integrated with current and future ICT tools, could improve the daily life of people with IDD by understanding their personal situations and helping them to interact with the information society.

The project tested the accessibility layer in 3 usage scenarios over a 14 month period. However, the project went beyond the selected usage scenarios: Able to Include produced an open-source Software Developer Kit (SDK) that fostered the introduction of a communications accessibility layer for people with IDD in any software development environment. This was done by steering the creation on an open-source community including software developers and users. The Accessibility Layer/Able-to-Include services address the eAccessibility needs of users with IDD in various contexts. The services can be delivered in multiple contexts across Europe on an open interoperable operational basis. Alternative solutions and services are accommodated.

The Accessibility Layer was tested in three separate applications: AbleSocial, AbleChat and AbleMail. For each application, a pilot study was set up in two iterations. As a first step, a beta version of each App was tested and evaluated by the end users. Based on the results of this beta test, further developments were made after which a second round was held.

Overall, they found that involving end users in the development process was greatly appreciated by both the technical developers and by the end users. The end users felt valued: their concerns were heard and developers took their opinions into account, which contributed to their feeling of self-worth. Both the use of the apps themselves and the participation in the project appear to have had beneficial effects on the life standard of the end users.

[2] Office for National Statistics, 'Improving disability data in the UK: 2019 (December 2019)

Online Today! (Cluster B: Replicable)

The internet and new digital technology has the potential to transform the lives of people with sensory loss, enabling many to gain access to information more easily, stay connected to others, save money or benefit from online services. However, many of these people are at significant risk from being excluded from the benefits digital technology can offer. Online Today! came off the back of research conducted by RNIB in 2014 around Digital Inclusion and the struggles that people with sight loss were experiencing with getting online and using digital services.

The main aim of Online Today! was around encouraging and supporting people with sensory loss to understand and better use technology and digital services. It was hoped that service users would feel supported to use their skills in daily life, to remain independent through communication, to be able to manage their own affairs (finance, health, general independence etc), to take part in online or in person communities, ultimately by being connected. It was not focused on technology for work, but instead for being active and online in leisure time and for general life. The program was UK wide, working with over 80,000 people directly, and many more through sharing resources and the partners they worked with. It was a mixture of 1:1 tuition, trouble shooting and facilitation of more formal training sessions. A technology volunteer team was put together to support people in their own homes and a dedicated digital tutor homes gave more in depth support. This was very effective due to high level of intervention. The UK wide staff team was composed predominantly of those with sight loss, who were effective role models for customers. The project reached individuals from age 4 to 102. Online Today! did extensive work with marketing teams to reach those with sight loss, both through public and RNIB channels, the sight loss sector and partners to let those with sight loss know about the project. Beneficiaries reported that they could communicate with others and access information more easily as a result of the skills they learnt from Online Today, enabling them to feel "more connected" with the wider world and involved in "mainstream technologies".

For further details, please visit and explore practices targeting people with disabilities at digitalinclusion.eu.