Our Manifesto: digital inclusion is everyone's business

Part 3: Digital inclusion as customer service

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Our Manifesto

A general election approaches and the 'how to solve digital exclusion manifestos' are popping out like popcorn. Here's ours.

> We believe digital inclusion is everyone's business and needs to be re-imagined.

Digital inclusion is a gateway, an enabler. Modern, everyday life in all its manifestations – personal, vocational, social, civic, economic, political – requires it.

We *cannot afford* to think about digital inclusion as a 'project' (time and output boundaried) or a 'programme' (time and outcome boundaried).

Digital inclusion needs to be everyone's continuous practice, default behaviour, working assumption. It needs to be a shared endeavour. And it needs to be re-framed as investment not cost.

We've honed in on five things we believe would make a significant, sustainable dent in digital exclusion and re-frame the vital, fundamental importance of digital inclusion:

1. **Political will and political leadership**. It starts at the top.
2. **Reimagining the models, money, stakeholders**. Updated, wide-eyed thinking about how we can all contribute to and sustain widespread digital inclusion.
3. **Digital inclusion as a form of customer service** propelled by mandatory, compliant behaviours. For and in all organisations – public, private, third sector. If an organisation has people in it, and serves people/ has customers, it needs to be digitally inclusive.
4. **Building capacity, stimulating ownership**: support for, promotion and celebration of, building organisational DI capacity and essential digital skills through peer-to-peer models that embed ownership and sustainability (AKA Digital Champion models).
5. **Social value and ESG**: hard-wiring of digital inclusion commitments into social value/ ESG.

Digital inclusion is everyone's business because no one approach and no single organisation/ agency/even government can own or deliver digital inclusion. Digital exclusion is a systemic, compound and complex issue. Its salve will be a systemic, compound and conscious response and most of us have a role to play.

Digital Inclusion as a form of Customer Service

We need to change the lens on how we deliver digital inclusion, which means we also need to change our conception of it. I know I say this *a lot* - because a fish can't see water. That's kind of where we've got to with practicality of making digital inclusion happen.

Digital inclusion as customer service is not a new idea but hitherto more exceptional than explicit. Flipping that could have an exponential effect on delivering digital inclusion.

Digital exclusion as an agenda and an imperative has traditionally been left to the public sector to sort out – primarily because it's the public sector that supports the most vulnerable and excluded. But the data is telling us something a bit different and certainly the newer forms of digital exclusion indices, with Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) the most recent, paints a more nuanced, complex (insidious?) picture. The digitally excluded are *not only* more disadvantaged users of public services they *are also* consumers of commercial products and services: they include *your* customers and service users.

Put another way, if you don't start to consider digital inclusion as a form of customer service, you're going to miss out on and lose customers. And you're going to spend more time (and money) on delivering your digital products and services because customers will struggle to engage with them and their acquisition and support costs will escalate.

Digital transformation will NOT increase efficiency aka save you money/boost your bottom line unless you invest both in digital customer adoption and, critically, your organisational capacity to support it.

The good news is that, like a fish in water, once you can see digital inclusion as customer service, you'll see opportunity everywhere to embrace and adopt it. Read on to keep swimming.

A quick recap....

- We've argued previously that we need to collectively change the lens on our conception of digital inclusion else we're never going to deal with it adequately or extensively – systematically – enough with digital exclusion.
- It's not just the government's job to fix it. And it's a matter of supply and demand. If you want digital customers and service users (demand) you need to create digitally inclusive products and services they can use, and promote and support them through people who are confident and capable in that role (supply).

What that means in practice is that:

- Digitally inclusive thinking and behaviours as default, second nature ones that are part and parcel of how all organisations operate – which may require regulation – makes sense, across the spectrum from equity to economics.
- Thinking about digital inclusion as a form of customer service is both obvious and logical.

Digital inclusion as the basis for universal digital skills and better service design

Another significant feature of digital inclusion, and why mainstreaming it is so necessary – and requiring new lenses, fresh tactics – is that it's the contextual precursor to the whole digital skills agenda.

Digital inclusion and the signs of digital exclusion are not treated prolifically in the Essential Digital Skills frameworks and this has always puzzled me. Those frameworks really jump straight to skills, even the Foundational digital skills one, and it's a missed opportunity. Because digital inclusion provides the necessary conditions in which skills are nourished and the incentive to acquire them is ignited.

We don't learn to drive for mechanistic pleasure, we learn to drive so we can go places! Unpack the context of the digital world to someone, how it links to their autonomy, independence, representation, participation, choice – give them examples they can relate to – and then progression into learning is logical. (Why are these skills frameworks also 6 years old?!!! 'Developed in 2018, updated in 2020.' Circle back to Manifesto point 1 on leadership, may be …)

Digital inclusion as customer service is also the sister to/ application of digital inclusion by design which is a concept/ call to action I wholeheartedly agree with. But will still be toothless without customer service teams who are also fluent in digital inclusion.

Examples of digital inclusion as customer service

These examples highlight opportunities in the public sector, in higher education and in the private sector: something for everyone!

1. The local authority: digital inclusion as service cohesion and a contractual obligation

We have extensive experience of building public sector digital inclusion capacity through Digital Champion models.

It's very interesting to me how that model has evolved with local authorities in particular, probably just in the last couple of years. I'd summarise that as:

a) building networks of Digital Champions across the area, within the LA and across other organisations that support the delivery of public services, is the keystone to building integrated digitally inclusive service delivery.

b) raising DI awareness, knowledge and skill across the whole LA workforce is key to the success: internal engagement and support – knowledge, skills and understanding – is as important as external.

c) engagement also builds profile and connects dots between people, departments and services that may not yet be wholly joined up.

It's in (b) and (c) where the idea of digital inclusion as customer service is taking root, and it is refreshing. In pressurised and often depleted operating environments, there is latent capacity within a workforce that can be fairly simply 'switched on'. We've got first hand experience of this:

Chloe Johnstone Deputy Lead at Digital Kent realised what was right under her eyes at the recent Digital Festival.

Digital Kent has an extensive Digital Champions programme, involving hundreds of Champions, delivered through four interlocking projects/Champ cohorts. That includes a young people's contingent through Kent Youth Digital Champions. It's scaffolded by the training, monitoring and management tools in our Digital Champions Network which we've also customised with and for them.

Chloe reflected that during the Digital Festival "our DC workshops were the most popular: scores of our colleagues signed up to them, our DCs inspired them and many were keen to get involved, either through signposting and referrals between and across services, or by actually also training to be Digital Champions. It made me realise that they could all be supporting our digital inclusion (DI) agenda by simply knowing more about DI, and that we would increase internal referrals and raise awareness of our work immeasurably. It feels exciting to think about

switching that capacity on by 'simply' raising digital inclusion awareness and building basic knowledge and skills right across the county."

In Brent Council, digital inclusion sits within Digital Transformation Services and is championed by the Council Leader Muhammed Butt. He is clear about why digital inclusion is critical for the Council. Bold is mine: *"Digital inclusion is a top priority for the council [...]I want all of our residents to have the skills to confidently use technology, to be self-sufficient in accessing online services, to access job opportunities and to get ahead."*

Brent Council have taken this same foundational approach to DI and written it into all the customer facing role contracts, including a triage and signposting component.

Digital Unite has been supporting <u>Brent's Digital Champion programme</u> for some time and the reasons our Network, integrating training and management tools, works so well for them is because it satisfies *a compliance requirement*.

If you are in a customer facing role, you need to do DC training. It's enlightened thinking but that doesn't mean it's easy either; it's part and parcel of digital transformation and that takes time.

"We've learnt that a culture change like this takes time and having dedicated digital inclusion staff and resources like Digital Unite's Network are vital for its success. Together we will ensure nobody is left behind." Mili Patel (Brent Council).

2. Higher Education: digital inclusion as customer service in core curriculum and professional development

If we are to future proof future generations of practitioners and professionals, we need to be preparing them for work in a digital world with digitally excluded service users.

This is a different, but related, issue to building digital skills capacity in the workplace. It's an important distinction.

<u>Our recent work with Keele University</u> illustrates the huge opportunity for embedding digital inclusion awareness with students who will be the workforce of the future, in the workplaces of the future – which will be increasingly digitally supported and mediated – with the service users of the future.

We took a pilot group of 37 physiotherapy students through our digital inclusion awareness course, <u>Inspire.</u> Inspire culminates in learners being guided and encouraged to make a digital skills pledge to help someone else. 74% of students completing Inspire pledged a whopping 356 hours of digital skills support.

A smaller group of 10 students then went on to train on the <u>Digital Champions Network</u> and volunteer in community settings. They all completed their training, earning digital badges and supported an average of 12 community learners each.

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Students are often 'digital natives' who grew up in a digital world. The realities of digital exclusion can be hard for them to full appreciate: 68% of those who started Inspire saying they knew "nothing or very little" about it.

As well as increasing their understanding of digital inclusion and positioning EDI as a central focus for a community placement, Keele wanted to help students with softer skills too - like improving listening skills and growing confidence dealing with a range of people.

Dr Claire Stapleton Programme Director, MSc Physiotherapy: *"Our students will encounter significant digital changes in healthcare delivery over their professional lives. It is crucial that they not only develop their own digital competencies but also acknowledge those who might face digital exclusion and understand its potential impact on an individual's health and well-being."*

3. Private sector: digital inclusion as a core component *of all* customer service

There are some interesting examples of digital inclusion as customer support in the financial sector. Some of those are through delivery partnerships, such as between friends at Lloyds Bank and We Are Group who run their Digital Helpline. Begun initially as a Covid support response to digitally isolated and unconfident customers in 2020 the success of the Helpline has meant it's an embedded support offer.

For me, building digital inclusion into the roles of the customer support teams in those organisations – much like Kent and Brent are doing – is where the deep, long-term benefit for the business and the customers really lies.

This is the approach we've been taking with NFU Mutual for the past 18 months, through an agile and iterative approach to building integral digital inclusion knowledge, skills and confidence in customer facing teams.

At NFU Mutual these teams sit in two places, Mutual Direct – call centre support – and the NFU Mutual Agency network. Agents are independent, regulated, have their own governance structure and their own local customers.

NFU Mutual has an impeccable reputation for customer care and support and they are rightly keen to safeguard and maintain as they release new digital products and services. Their customer base includes significant numbers of older people and those in rural communities, two cohorts that can be particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion.

They've been far sighted and proactive preparing for this and know that building organisational digital inclusion awareness, especially but not exclusively in the customer facing teams, will be key to not just supporting customers with their digital offers but also in the round. Digital exclusion might manifest at the point of contact but it will also be manifesting in other areas of that customer's life. That can be a nuanced, multi-faceted and sensitive set of considerations.

We worked very closely with them to develop a bespoke version of our Inspire training, which was successfully piloted that last autumn. The second release of that course plus some next level ASLT (animated scenario learning technique) training will be piloted this summer with a roll out scheduled for the autumn. It will become mandatory and reflects the seriousness with which the business takes digital inclusion and how fundamental it is for both staff and customers.

Ella Beck, Digital Adoption Lead, reflects: "The skills and confidence of NFU Mutual people matter and will be key to ensuring customer support during digital transformation. Customer facing teams need to be supported to embrace the roll out of digital products and customers should have the best possible experience. Digital inclusion gaps will make digital adoption more resource intensive. Preparing customer facing teams, and also crucially including their input and bringing them on the inclusion journey, is key."

What can YOU do?

- If you are working and/or volunteering, consider the digital inclusion of the people you work with and for. Is your organisation alert to digital literacy barriers and exclusion for colleagues and customers? How do you start that conversation, who needs to be in it?
- If you are working and/or volunteering, push for digital inclusion training to be part of the mandatory/ compliance training set where you are. If health and safety and GDPR is mandatory, why isn't digital inclusion? EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) training is in the ball park, but digital inclusion is an imperative/ facet of wider EDI that is not typically well enough covered.
- Everyone has some sort of digital inclusion opportunity close by: digital exclusion turns up in all sorts of outfits. Think about your personal social networks; who is struggling with what? You don't have to be an expert to make a digital inclusion difference.
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