



Our Manifesto: digital inclusion is everyone's business

Part 4: Building Capacity and Ownership

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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 bounded) or a 'programme' (time and outcome bounded).

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.

Building capacity, stimulating ownership of digital inclusion delivery through Digital Champions.

Building inherent, innate digital inclusion delivery capacity within an organisation is the only sustainable, scalable, cost-effective way to deliver digital inclusion at scale and sustainably.

We call it building Digital Champion capacity. But it can go by other names too: train-the-trainer, play-it-forward, peer-to-peer.

Digital Champions are proven to support wider and strategic digital inclusion strategies.

“Including Champions as part of our strategy has been very helpful. Champions help to extend reach, bring diverse perspectives and skills, grow our capacity for supporting people in our communities.”

“The programme has helped us equip staff as well as volunteers to make every contact count for digital inclusion and support as part of other roles.” (NHS England DC programme 2023)

The Digital Champion approach works, essentially, because it is **flexible and scalable**. We now know its winning characteristics empirically, but/and it's taken 10+ years of tweaking and testing. It:

- stimulates ownership of the agenda
- encourages sustainability
- fosters collaboration and partnership
- accommodates specificity and targeting; of Champs, learners, geographies, thematic/ service-led issues etc etc
- nourishes existing, and builds new, connections within and across delivery teams and communities
- offers personal and professional development
- promotes behaviours of appreciation, empathy, reciprocity
- transcends structural organisational dynamics and hierarchies
- strengthens organisational culture
- underpins strategic digital transformation agendas
- facilitates creativity
- enhances health and well-being of those Championing and those being supported
- is cost effective

This fourth article discusses scale and flexibility through some of those characteristics.

It's something we've been working on for the last 10 years and we've learned a lot. During that time we've:

- trained **8,664** Digital Champions (an average of 74 Champions per month since Dec 2014).
- who have supported **415,872** people to build their digital confidence and skills
- and earned **23,973 Digital Badges** for their training and learning
- Our Tech Guides which support learning and training have been used **26,333,501** times.

The examples in here are unabashedly ours. But/and there are use cases and examples that are of universal interest. Read on to find out why.

A quick recap....

In the last Manifesto article (number 3) I was advocating thinking of digital inclusion is a matter of supply and demand.

“Whether you're a local authority or a bank, 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).”

I also suggested that 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.

The third point in that sequence is:

- Building inherent, innate digital inclusion delivery capacity within an organisation is the only sustainable, scalable, cost-effective way to do this.

Our role in the Digital Champion ecosystem and endeavour

Digital Unite's (self-appointed, more on that later) mission is to promote digital inclusion in the service of personal, social, civic, economic, and political empowerment.

We do this by supporting public and private organisations (service providers) to start, grow, evolve and sustain in-house Digital Champions – be they staff and/or volunteers – to drive digital inclusion and essential digital skills with their customers (service users).

Our vision is a digitally inclusive society for all. We believe that Digital Champions and building DC capacity has a huge role to play in realising this.

From 1996 to about 2010, we did this in a localised, long-hand, slightly 'command and control' way by dropping our trainers into other people's places to do that Champion work with their customers/service users.

There was always something a bit wonky about this, though personally I learned a lot from it and so did the business.

Essentially, it was hard to scale that model: operationally it felt complicated and costly. Reflecting on that I think that today, with the advances in AI in particular, you'd be looking at developing a very different shaped business if you wanted an army of digital inclusion agents on the ground. But back in the day, that operational challenge was probably the fork in the road for me strategically and I'm grateful for it because it's brought a great evolutionary richness. Not without challenge but nothing goes in a straight line.

I'm certainly not knocking that model wholesale either as a way of working. People like [Matt Adams](#) and [Gori Yaya](#) have their digital training tribes, for example, and they do that very well. It's just not for me.

Added to which, I've probably always been bee like. Something about the hive and the collective endeavour kept buzzing in my ear: *Wouldn't it just be better all round if you, dear client, built this Digital Champion capacity for yourselves on your own terms? Wouldn't we be happier, and more streamlined, if we focussed our efforts on supporting you, dear client, not to reinvent the wheel? Not to have to design a set of standards and competencies, monitoring and support methodologies around the role that you probably can't do as well as we can - because you are first and foremost a brilliant charity/ council/ social housing provider?* Mr Gove (in)famously didn't approve of experts, and look what happened to him.

Game changer: a product-based approach to Digital Champions

What does this actually mean?

It means we use a digital product/platform – the [Digital Champions Network](#) (DCN) - to anchor the delivery our DC services. We add non-platform elements (like drop-ins, workshops and celebrations – but the platform is the core.

A product-based approach to building and scaling – and customising - Digital Champion projects is part of that 'treating digital inclusion like supply and demand' idea.

It offers scale, sustainability, operational and financial efficiency in a completely different ball park. To both us and the organisations we work with and for.

“It’s all the wrap around support for Champions that we don’t have the capacity to provide within our own organisation. So CPD training that you can access anytime, PDFs, guides and resources Champions can keep coming back to, specific help around working with specific groups of people like different ages/backgrounds.” NHS Champion Project manager

We’ve been using a product-based approach to supporting Digital Champion networks for over ten years. If you are interested in the technical evolution and iteration of the product (aka the How we do it) there’s a really interesting blog from Learning Pool who provide our current learning management system (LMS) [here](#).

Scaling the skills and confidence of Champs to support the digitally excluded

The Digital Champions Network (DCN) is what it says on the tin: a network for Digital Champions. With 25+ CPD accredited training courses for Champs on a range of issues across a range of contexts, and 100s of supporting resources, it’s a treasure trove.

The courses and resources cover a wide range of digital inclusion and skills context, both in relation to the people the Champ might be working with, and the things the learner may want to know and do digitally. Developing the knowledge, confidence and skills of Champions helps to put them in the shoes of their learners, consolidate their own skills and development, including in relation to other life experiences.

“Champions sometimes have lived experience of what our clients are going through both with their digital skills but also their health conditions.” NHS project manager.

We know the training and support in the DCN works. Of Digital Champions using the DCN:

- 98% report *increases in their digital championing skills and understanding*
- 96% say they *increase their own digital skills* through their champion training
- 94% say they are *better able to support others* including with well-being and employability

Scaling nuance and complexity, facilitating partnerships

One of the brilliant things about the DCN is that it allows us to offer organisations both scale and flexibility in the way they develop their Digital Champion projects or programmes. And it's made for partnerships.

Being able to facilitate a partnership approach to delivering digital inclusion by bringing together a range of DC projects, or different DC cohorts in different delivery teams, from within the same geography or across geographies, is all possible on the DCN.

We call this 'tiered membership'. Any number of stakeholders or projects or groups, working with distinct Champs and specific learners in particular communities, can manage their individual projects within the structure and context of a larger programme.

And all the data about that partnership approach can be viewed and analysed at a micro and macro level. Or put another way, by and for each cohort/partner, and also by and for the partnership/ programme as a whole.

Examples of tiered memberships include Bexley Local Care Partnership (**15** projects/stakeholder groups); Brent Council (**7 council departments** each with a Champion cohort); Let's Get Digital West Cumbria **14 organisations** with their own DCs projects sitting within the wider programme. We're currently discussing the set up of a **40 project** structure, which will be immense.

Scaling the collection and use of data

All organisations on the DCN have Project Manager tools and functionality which allow them to monitor, analyse and extract data about their work. DCs can use the DCN to record learner activity.

Data is power. It tells you what is happening, and what is not happening. It allows you to celebrate the good and tweak the less good. It's useful to everyone be they front line delivery – the Digital Champions – or managers or funders. It's useful to partnerships, it can help inform future collaborations, growth. And most importantly it's of value to the end learners who are supported with quality and consistency by people who are trained and supported to do that.

We have a DCN User Group which has a voice – and a stake – in its development.

Scaling the variety of delivery

There are LOADS of case studies of Digital Champion projects and programmes, underpinned by the DCN, on [our website](#) which I am not going to duplicate here.

Quick reference to show off the breadth and range like a peacock's tail:

Digital Champions in libraries *"We have given all staff in branch libraries access so they can build up their confidence and knowledge and give day to day support for customers. It is working!" Cumberland Libraries*

Digital Champions in health *"Including Champions as part of our strategy has been very helpful. Champions help to extend reach, bring diverse perspectives and skills, grow our capacity for supporting people in our communities." NHS project manager*

Digital Champions in social housing *"Joining the Digital Champions Network gives us the infrastructure we need to evolve our digital skills support into a more encompassing and sustainable approach for our tenants." City West Homes*

Digital Champions in a social care charity *"It's wonderful to see the people we support become more digitally confident, and to see the positive impact that joining the digital world has on their lives." KeyRing Social Care*

What can YOU do?

- Think about how you can create and manage a team of Digital Champions in your organisation
- Get a taste for the DCN by doing a [free course](#)
- Get a feel for the extent and quality of our training and learning resources by browsing our (free) [Tech Guides on our website](#) – and we'll be hitting 27m page views in no time
- Use our (free) [online planner](#) to be guided through thinking about how – indeed why – to set up a Digital Champion project
- Get in touch and [ask for a demo of the DCN or our brilliant DCN brochure](#)
- Pass it all on!