The One Digital collaboration

Evaluation of the
'test and learn' year 2016

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January 2017

Executive summary

Background to the One Digital collaboration

Digital technology is at the heart of modern society, transforming how we communicate, work, consume and learn. However, the digital revolution has not benefitted everyone equally. More than one in five adults in the UK lack the skills they need to use digital technologies. Those without basic digital skills are likely to be older, poorer, and facing other forms of inequality.

One Digital is an unusual and ambitious collaboration, bringing together diverse partners to promote basic digital skills, to ensure that as many people and organisations as possible can benefit from the opportunities of the digital age. The collaboration partners' approaches are very diverse, but each has in common the concept of recruiting and supporting intermediaries – known as **digital champions** – to help people improve their digital skills.

The collaboration consists of five delivery partners – AbilityNet, Affinity Sutton, Age UK, Citizens Online and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) – underpinned by learning services and collaboration support from the sixth partner, Digital Unite, via their online Digital Champions Network (DCN).

Evaluation approach
The independent One Digital programme evaluation focused on cross-collaboration issues and activities: the use of digital champion models, the shared use of digital champion support services, and the collaboration process itself. It also evaluated outcomes for digital champions and beneficiaries. The evaluation took a developmental approach, combining an extensive programme of stakeholder interviews, meeting observations and site visits with surveys, online diaries and self-audits conducted throughout the year.

Evaluation findings

In its first 'test and learn year' from 2015-16 the One Digital partners collectively recruited and trained more than 1000 digital champions, who supported more than 11,000 people to improve their basic digital skills.

Digital champions recruited and supported
The establishment of a cohort of over a thousand digital champions with a common and active interest in supporting digital inclusion is a significant output from the One Digital collaboration, and a notable asset for the digital inclusion sector overall.

Digital champions came from diverse backgrounds and had very varying levels of previous digital experience, ranging from IT professionals to people who were 'newly converted' to digital technology and wanted to share their enthusiasm.

We found evidence of digital champions – particularly those with less confidence or experience – improving their skills in helping others use digital technologies as a result of participating in One Digital. They attributed these improvements to learning through practice, learning from peers, and using resources from the Digital Champions Network. They also said their own digital skills had improved during the course of the year.

Beneficiaries supported
The One Digital beneficiary group as a whole had a higher proportion of women, was older, had fewer qualifications and higher levels of disability than the average population. As a result of the support they got from digital champions, over 80 percent of beneficiaries we surveyed reported increased confidence in their basic digital skills, better understanding of the benefits digital technologies can offer, and increased motivation to use them.

We found evidence of tangible improvements in people's lives resulting from their increased digital skills, particularly in the employment and social spheres. We also found evidence of improved overall wellbeing for beneficiaries; some said that improving their digital skills had been life-changing.

Collaboration process
The One Digital collaboration forged a strong collective identity in a short period, at the same time as delivering its collective outputs and outcomes. We found evidence of shared learning about digital champion approaches. The existence of the collaboration evidently opened up channels of dialogue, both informal and formal, which would not otherwise have existed. Partners valued this opportunity and benefited from it; it stimulated reflection within their organisations which impacted on strategic understanding as well as operational approaches to digital inclusion work.

As might be expected in a newly emergent group, there was some divergence of views on the strategic purpose of the collaboration – whether it should focus principally on delivery, capacity-building or shared learning. Partners were working constructively towards a closer consensus at the end of the test and learn phase.

Digital champion models
We identified three digital champion models being used by the One Digital partners: professional community digital champions, volunteer community digital champions, and digital champions 'embedded' in third party organisations.

We found evidence of all three models achieving beneficial outcomes. Each model had strengths and weaknesses in terms of the consistency and flexibility of skills support provided. The professional digital champions were highly effective, the volunteer digital champions offered the potential for scale, and the embedded digital champions had potential for both scale and sustainability, but were highly dependent on strategic buy-in from the host organisation. Success factors for digital champion models included: working with intermediary organisations to recruit digital champions, provision of initial training and ongoing support for champions, recognising the importance of soft skills in the digital champion role, and adopting a learner-led or person-centred approach to beneficiary support.

Shared digital champion support services

We found evidence of benefits of the shared use of the Digital Champions Network (DCN) platform at partner organisation level as well as for individual digital champions. Online learning and support resources on the DCN had value for digital champions, though this was more evident for those new to the role, or with lower levels of confidence in their skills, than for those with more experience of the role.

In addition to providing learning support, the existence of a Digital Champions Network had the effect of delineating the digital champion role, giving it visibility and credibility.

Recommendations

Principal recommendations for future planning included:

- Consolidate the collaboration's potential to become an innovative evidence-based community of practice, by focusing cross-collaboration activity on shared learning about digital champion approaches, and shared capacity-building for digital champions (including but not limited to services delivered by the Digital Champions Network)
- Identify areas where joint commissioning of services would be beneficial, for example joint commissioning of evidence reviews, evaluation services, learning support services
- Adopt best practice approaches to promote shared learning, for example action learning sets, quarterly practice learning seminars
- Disseminate shared learning from the collaboration externally to all stakeholders with an interest in digital inclusion
- Where there is evidenced need and a strong rationale for joint working, explore joined-up delivery of services bilaterally or trilaterally between relevant partners, rather than as a cross-collaboration activity
- Focus the Digital Champions Network more narrowly on the learning resources digital champions need to help others; signpost learners elsewhere for digital skills training
- Continue to nurture and grow the UK-wide cross-sectoral cohort of digital champions which has been recruited in One Digital's first year, with the aim of making the DCN a 'go-to' source of learning and practice support materials for digital champions and those who support them.

Full Report

For a copy of the full One Digital evaluation report please email du@digitalunite.com.