Bridging the Digital Divide: Not Every Low Income Family is the Same

by Angela Siefer | Sep 20, 2016 | Digital Inclusion News

Today, the issue of digital equity is receiving more attention than ever. For good reason; Internet access is no longer a luxury, it is a daily necessity. It is essential for academic success at all levels and how we find employment, career training and a host of other essential services. In our efforts to level the digital playing field for low income families, we must avoid the assumption that all of them relate to technology, computers and the Internet in the same way. To be effective in digital inclusion efforts, we must recognize that there are at least four different subsets within this population, each with its own unique set of needs.

1) The Early adopters: Research has shown that low income families with school children tend to have a higher rate of broadband adoption, approximately half have access at home. The highest adoption rates are where discounted Internet plans have been offered for a number of years, such as Comcast's Internet Essentials and Cox's Connect2Compete. While early adopters are already connected, we should not overlook them. Some are making make great sacrifices to pay market rate for their Internet subscriptions so their children can get online and struggle to keep up their payments. Some rely on expensive smartphone data plan. Others have connection speeds to slow to get much done. Many have outdated computers, little or no tech support and need training and access to online resources.

As the online world continues to evolve, digital inclusion practitioners will never be out of a job. Under resourced families will always need ongoing support to take advantage of all the Internet has to offer. This need was recently out in a recent Pew Research study. It revealed that 52% of adults lacked "digital readiness" to pursue online learning. This group is largely made up of older, low income adults. *(See http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/09/20/digital-readiness-gaps/)*

2) The Uninformed: There are still low income families that know they need to b[e] online and can afford a discounted Internet plan but simply don't know they are available. This is one area where we can have an immediate impact by bringing awareness to these families through resident signup and training events. ISPs like

Comcast, Cox and Google Fiber have staff members in in cities where they offer discounted Internet service who are dedicated to this type of outreach. They are seeking local partners to help them stage these types of awareness events.

3) **The Financially Challenged:** Public housing families have incomes of less than $1,000 a month. For most, the only way they get connected is if someone else pays for it. This was the case for 80% of homes that were brought online in the first year of HUD's ConnectHome initiative. While no federal funds were made available to support the initiative, cities, housing authorities, and corporate and philanthropy partners stepped up to provide funding and free connections. Various approaches were used; distributing Sprint hotspots, installing Wi-Fi systems in multifamily properties and sponsoring families using the Internet Essential Opportunity gift cards. It is important to note that owning a computer, laptop or tablet is actually be the most important cost barrier to being connected to the Internet. This is why effective digital inclusion outreach must include providing free or low cost devices as part of the strategy.

The Unconvinced: Lastly, there those who can afford a discounted Internet connection but are simply not convinced that they need it. In this group are those who feel all they need is access through a smartphone. In order to close the "Homework Gap," adult heads of household must be convinced of the high value of robust in-home access. When it comes to broadband adoption efforts, this can be the most challenging group of all, representing a significant portion of households living on the wrong side of the Digital Divide. Some are basically unaware of all the benefits of connectivity. Others have never had a chance to see how much more can be done using a full sized screen and keyboard instead of just smartphone. There are also parents who are unfamiliar or even intimidated by technology and choose not to get involved with computers and the Internet.

The only way to influence those in this final group is a long-term dedicated educational and marketing effort. It requires multiple class sessions and, often, one-on-one tutoring to help them learn all that is possible online and to gain the confidence they need to become productive users of the Internet.

When President Obama announced the ConnectALL initiative, he declared the goal was to connect 20 million more Americans to the Internet. While we have the national spotlight, it's a good time to help policymakers understand that, in order to do this, it is going to take a significant infusion of money from the government, corporate and philanthropic sectors. Too many efforts focus only on providing computers and connectivity but fail to factor in the social dynamic of broadband adoption. Successful digital inclusions efforts need be dedicated leadership and "boots on the ground" to be executed successfully. Bringing last group of non-adopters will be very labor intensive. This where we will need funding make a real difference.

Michael Liimatta has led initiatives that equip and uplift people in underserved communities for over thirty years. He is co-founder of Connecting for Good, a Kansas City nonprofit focusing on digital inclusion. Until recently, he served as manager of ConnectHome, the broadband adoption pilot at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, helping to get school children in public housing online in 27 cities and one tribal nation. He can be reached at mkliimatta@gmail.com *(LinkedIn:* https://www.linkedin.com/in/mliimatta*)*

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Definition: Digital Equity

Digital Equity is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

Definition: Digital Inclusion

Digital Inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This includes 5 elements: 1) affordable, robust broadband internet service; 2) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; 3) access to digital literacy training; 4) quality technical support; and 5) applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration. Digital Inclusion must evolve as technology advances. Digital Inclusion requires intentional strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional and structural barriers to access and use technology.

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