

Digital inclusion

At a time when many occupational therapists are evaluating new ways of working, **Joel Reynolds** and **Suzy England** demonstrate that people should already have the skills to promote digital inclusion within their workplaces and wider society

There has been a growing interest in the use of digital tools to improve the accessibility and efficiency of business activities for some time. Over recent years, an increasing number of organisations have developed digital strategies that seek to embed digital ways of working that support staff productivity, as well as tools designed to improve citizen access and experience of their service.

In relation to occupational therapy service provision, previous digital articles (as part of the OTnews TEC series) have shone a light on the ways in which digital technologies are impacting on a range of services across health and care, as well as education contexts.

In addition, RCOT has facilitated two 'digital first' networking events to capture the experiences of occupational therapists. The learning from these activities has been pulled together into a RCOT digital topic webpage (www.rcot.co.uk/node/3507).

Two clear themes have emerged and those are: how the occupational therapist uses their Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) lens to plan, implement and evaluate digital interventions; as well as the need to consider both staff and citizen digital literacy when introducing new ways of working.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a reliance on digital tools for working, living and participating in society. Considering the internet has been described as an inherently disabling environment (Easton 2013), when considered within the social model of disability there is an established digital divide that is at risk of being exacerbated.

Furthermore, failure to recognise the inequalities within society in relation to digital skills and access to technology is a matter of social justice.

Larson-Lund (2018) asks that occupational therapists adopt an occupational justice perspective on digital transformation. We call on occupational therapists to utilise their PEO lens to reflect and evaluate on whether these new ways of working are inclusive practices for all staff and citizens.

What is digital inclusivity

Digital inclusivity is not about disability but about universality and making something that can be used by as many people as possible. We are proposing that occupational therapists adopt a two-step approach, whereby they consider both the access and the experience of occupation in the digital environment.

Enabling access

Web accessibility is a legal requirement under the Equality Act (2010) to ensure digital spaces, for example websites and apps, are accessible to individuals of all abilities.

There are clear guidelines for web access, including guidance on adjusting the information to meet the person's ability level (www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/). Some of the barriers to this include language, specific impairments, as well as the readability and layout.

What we mean by digital inclusion: <https://digital.nhs.uk/about-nhs-digital/our-work/digital-inclusion/what-digital-inclusion-is>

What is Web accessibility?: <https://abilitynet.org.uk/accessibility-services/what-is-digital-accessibility>

Definitions

Digital literacy refers to: 'Those capabilities that fit someone for living, learning, working, participating and thriving in a digital society' (Health Education England).

Digital divide refers to: 'The problem of some members of society not having the opportunity or knowledge to use computers and the internet that others have' (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/digital-divide>).

As occupational therapists we should approach digital accessibility in the same way we would access to the built environment. This is led by the person's need and desire for participation in an occupation, requiring activity analysis to help identify any adaptations or adjustments.

These might be ensuring accessible entry ramps, appropriate toilet facilities, suitable lighting, and/or adapting the activity that takes place within the space so that it includes people with a range of sensory and/or cognitive needs.

Similarly, we equally need to tailor our input to enable access to the digital space. Providing the equivalent of virtual ramps and aids that will assist in getting access to online occupations.

This could be a simple how to guide, recommending equipment to overcome physical needs, setting up accessibility tools on a person's device, or structuring an activity so that it includes regular breaks and check ins to ensure understanding and engagement, aiding participation and increasing the inclusivity in the online occupation.

Digital experience

Digital experience includes accessibility, but is also concerned with how individuals and groups participate in virtual environments.

Many of us will be able to reflect on our own personal experiences of engaging in new ways with health and care services, online banking, as well as an array of digital social activities. This has provided us with an invaluable experience of the digital world and specifically what we like and what we don't.

With the increasing move of many of our meaningful activities to the online space, there is a role for occupational therapists to support people to participate in meaningful activities in roles that matter to them online.

To do this will mean having an awareness of the structural barriers of connectivity and affordability (cost, coverage, access to devices in households etc), as well as exploring the different views, past experiences and our own familiarity and ability in different online spaces.

Although digital literacy/access is fast becoming a basic need, it is still often a luxury for many disadvantaged groups. Occupational therapists need to have the right knowledge and skills to enable people to participate.

They need to embrace the new online landscape and seek out initiatives that will allow their practice to develop and reflect the new environments and occupations that the people they work with could participate in.

Who could be digitally excluded?

In the UK, 21.3 per cent of the whole population are without basic digital skills. Some sections of the population are more likely to be digitally excluded than others, including: older people; people in lower income groups; people without a job; people in social housing; people with disabilities; people with fewer educational qualifications, excluded or left school before 16; people living in rural areas; homeless people; and people whose first language is not English.

If we take a closer look at older people, although a significant and growing number of older adults are online, only 47 per cent of adults aged 75 years and over recently used the internet (Larson-Lund 2018). This group may experience a range of barriers.

Essential digital skills are also correlated to higher social grade levels, taken up more in urban environments and less prevalent amongst women (Helsper and van Deursen 2017).

In 2019, the proportion of recent internet users was lower for adults who were disabled (78 per cent), as defined by those who identified as disabled in the Equality Act, compared to those who were not disabled (95 per cent). The difference between internet use in disabled and non-disabled adults was greater in the older age groups. For adults aged 75 years and over, 41 per cent of disabled adults and 54 per cent of non-disabled adults were recent internet users (ONS 2019)

People with a disability are three times more likely to have never used the internet. In 2014, four million people with a disability had never been online (NHS England 2018), with those who experience most problems online also having the most difficulty obtaining high-quality support even when it is available (Helsper and van Deursen 2017).

While this digital divide is not a new phenomenon (Clayton and Macdonald 2013), the increasing move of many of our favourite occupations and interactions

online risks worsening the impact of loneliness, isolation and occupational deprivation on marginalised groups, and increasing the health inequities associated with older age, education and poverty (Azzopardi-Muscate and Sørensen 2019).

It's clear, that there has never been a more pressing time to consider the participation of individuals and communities who access our services in the online environment/occupation.

Individuals who are digitally excluded may struggle to access remote health and care services as well as lose their roles and ability to participate in wider societal activities like banking, shopping and virtual social groups.

However, it does not have to be so. A report from the Phoenix Centre (2009) highlighted the positive effects of digital participation. Older people who have access to the internet are three times less likely to be socially excluded. Retired adults who use the internet have 20 per cent less depression, showing the benefits of digital participation.

During lockdown, there have been many excellent examples of communities coming together online, removing physical, cultural and societal barriers to participation in the space; from mutual aid groups organising peer support initiatives, to third sector organisations providing tech equipment and cultural opportunities.

Occupational therapists are expertly placed to be a part of this; they have the expertise to analyse the activity demands presented by participation in the digital environment, considering a person's physical and cognitive capabilities, as well as the impact of the social and physical environment (Nygard and Rosenberg, 2016).

Call to action

We know that occupational therapists are already working on supporting people with digital literacy and enabling participation in a range of occupations, from social groups, work roles and improving access, to services.

We would like to hear and receive examples from members and those who access occupational therapy services on: how occupational therapists have worked with citizens to co-produce digitally accessible services; the skills occupational therapists need to lead on digital inclusive practice; how occupational therapists enable all people to participate in a range of online occupational roles; and what do occupational therapists need to feel equipped to enable the people/communities you work with to participate in online occupations?

References

- Azzopardi-Muscat N and Sorensen K (2019) Towards an equitable digital public health era: promoting equity through a health literacy perspective, *European Journal of Public Health*, 29(3) 13-17 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckz166>
- Clayton J and Macdonald SJ (2013) The limits of technology, *Information, Communication and Society*, 16(6): 945-966. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2012.748817
- Easton C (2013) An examination of the internet's development as a disabling environment in the context of the social model of disability and

Fischl et al (2020) utilised a multiple case study methodology to explore how tailoring to support older adults' engagement in digital technology (DT) mediated occupations could be schematised. Nine older adults from Northern Sweden each participated in a collaborative process to support DT-mediated occupations. Data collection included structured interviews (guided by a battery of instruments), observations, field notes and final semi-structured interviews (eight individuals participated in a final interview). Data analysis involved cross-case synthesis. The findings are presented as a proposed scheme, consisting of steps built from strategies used in the cases. The authors suggest this scheme could contribute to occupational therapists' knowledge on how to support older adults' engagement in contemporary occupations, but requires further testing in various practice settings.

Reference

Fischl C, Blusi M, Lindgren H, Nilsson I (2020) Tailoring to support digital technology-mediated occupational engagement for older adults – a multiple case study. *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, May 12. [Epub ahead of print].

anti-discrimination legislation in the UK and USA, *Universal Access in the Information Society*, (12)1: 105-114. DOI: 10.1007/s10209-011-0268-2

- Larson-Lund, M (2018) The digital society: Occupational therapists need to act proactively to meet the growing demands of digital competence, *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 81(12): 733-735. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0308022618776879>
- Helsper EJ and van Deursen AJAM (2017) Do the rich get digitally richer? Quantity and quality of support for digital engagement, *Information, Communication and Society*, 20:5, 700-714, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2016.1203454
- NHS England (2018) *Improving access for all: reducing inequalities in access to general practice services*. Available online at: www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/inequalities-resource-sep-2018.pdf
- Nygård L and Rosenberg L (2016) How attention to everyday technology could contribute to modern occupational therapy: A focus group study. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 79(8): 467-474. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0308022615613354>
- Office for National Statistics (2019) *Internet users UK; 2019*. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2019
- Phoenix Center (2009) *Internet use and depression among the elderly*. Phoenix Center policy paper No. 38

Joel Reynolds and **Suzy England**, RCOT professional advisers, email: joel.reynolds@rcot.co.uk or suzy.England@rcot.co.uk



EVIDENCE LINK