

Digital exclusion of disabled adults from voluntary (and paid) work

Summary

Online access and digital skills are now essential for many forms of voluntary work. However, disabled adults face barriers to digital inclusion. Nearly one million disabled adults in the UK lack internet access at home, and approximately two million do not own a smartphone or computer.

We analysed longitudinal survey data and interviewed disabled adults to understand the digital barriers they face in accessing on and offline voluntary work. Our research shows that those disabled adults who are digitally connected are significantly more likely to engage in volunteering, particularly online.

Four key barriers need to be addressed to close this digital disability gap: lack of digital access and skills; complex needs requiring ongoing support; lack of resources to overcome barriers; and assumed basic digital competence.

We recommend several measures, including:

- Extension of the Access to Work Scheme to cover voluntary work.
- Collaborative partnerships among government agencies, voluntary sector organisations, and disabled communities to co-create solutions.
- Government funding for devices and internet access, together with tailored digital skills training and support.
- Disabled communities should be engaged in policy development to ensure policies reflect their lived experiences.

Our research also has implications for improving access to paid work. In our study, disabled participants highlighted that the digital inclusion challenges they encounter in voluntary work are often the same or closely related to those they face in other areas of life, including accessing paid work.

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As today's policy agendas increasingly focus on ensuring digital access and promoting a 'digital by default' approach, digitalisation affects every aspect of life – including work, education, and welfare. However, despite technological advances, disabled adults encounter significant barriers to digital inclusion, particularly in volunteering and employment. These barriers can limit participation in work and social life, undermining equality and social inclusion.

"The problem was that I couldn't communicate. I wanted to say things, but I couldn't say them. And then people couldn't hear me if I had said them and then they couldn't see me. So, it was all of that, it puts a lot of stress [on me] ... I felt very isolated and very vulnerable which isn't great for disability either ... What you want to feel is that there are people around all the time ... IT and disability, it can cause a huge amount of stress if you're not careful." (Blaze, aged 70-89, with a mobility impairment, discussing their experience in an online meeting)

Scale of digital exclusion

Our research (Kamerāde et al., 2024) estimates that nearly one million disabled adults in the UK lack internet access at home, 1.4 million do not use the internet, and approximately two million do not own a smartphone or computer. Disabled adults are less likely to use the internet for essential tasks like browsing, email, and online banking, which are crucial for volunteering and paid work.

This digital divide is further exacerbated for disabled people who belong to already disadvantaged groups, such as older adults, those with low incomes, benefit recipients, renters, people with lower education levels, and those living alone, who face even greater challenges in accessing and using digital technologies. For example, 81% of non-disabled adults without any formal qualifications have access to the internet at home, compared to 76% of disabled adults with the same level of education.

Benefits of digital inclusion

We found that regular internet access is a crucial resource for disabled adults; those who are digitally connected are significantly more likely to engage in voluntary work than those who are not. Notably, disabled adults are more likely to volunteer online than their non-disabled counterparts as, for many, online volunteering is more accessible.

"So for me now one of the major issues I have at the moment is fatigue ... by the time I got made myself presentable, hauled myself out of the house, travelled to somewhere you know, actually that probably rules out a lot of opportunities for me, whereas sitting in a, you know, sitting in a chair in front of a computer where I've only got a commute as far as the, you know, the next room makes things much more accessible." (Astra, aged 50-69, with a mobility impairment)

However, some disabled adults who have not recently volunteered indicate that the shift to online volunteering can pose a barrier.

Four key barriers to digital inclusion

1. Lack of digital access and skills

Our survey data analysis and interviews indicate that digital inclusion in volunteering is closely linked to overall digital inclusion in other areas of life. The same devices, technologies, social support, and skills used in employment and other domains are often applied to volunteering.

Therefore, the first step to achieving the digital inclusion of disabled adults in voluntary and paid work is ensuring that they possess the required digital access and skills.

2. Complex needs require ongoing support

Our research also highlights the importance of personal ongoing support tailored to the specific needs of each disabled adult. The complexity of impairments often requires customised solutions, and disabled adults have emphasised the critical need for continuous support to address issues as they arise and adapt to changing circumstances.

"I think a lot of them they ask 'do you have a disability?' and then they would say 'what kind of support do you need?' I don't know! If you don't start doing the job, you never know what you really need." (Eden, 50-69, with a hearing impairment)

"You don't feel comfortable asking [for help in] a big organisation. It's quite scary. Asking that person who you always talk to within a small organisation ... can be much easier." (Nova, aged 50-69, with a visual impairment)

3. Lack of resources to overcome barriers

Disabled participants in our study reported that current policies and organisational practices do not adequately address income and digital access disparities, resulting in missed opportunities for engagement in volunteering and employment.

“I’m used to not having the right equipment. I can’t afford it. I’ve got old equipment that doesn’t work very well... I’d prefer to have more software and voice activation... And I probably will have to jump through hoops to get it.” (Sterling, 50-69, neurodivergent)

The lack of support from the Access to Work scheme for voluntary roles presents a substantial barrier. The Access to Work scheme currently helps adults with physical or mental health conditions, or a disability, to get, or stay in, paid work. For example, it can provide them with a grant to pay for specialist equipment and assistive software.

However, this scheme applies only to paid work, not voluntary work. Many disabled people, particularly those from lower-income households, cannot afford the necessary adjustments to participate in volunteering. This issue was highlighted by both disabled adults and vocational rehabilitation experts who assist disabled adults in returning to employment. Some disabled adults emphasised how the Access to Work scheme support for their employment also enabled them to volunteer.

“I’d like to see much more done about improving access full stop for everybody, whether they’re doing it for themselves, whether they’re employed, whether they’re volunteering, you know, why don’t we just improve access to everything for everybody?” (Astra, 50-69, with a mobility impairment)

“When I had one of my attacks and my MS [multiple sclerosis] attacks which made my hands not work, I did have Dragon software and Access to Work paid for that ... I think because I’m in the reverse in that I use my employment to help my volunteering.” (Indigo, 50-69, with a mobility impairment)

4. Assumed basic digital competency

Disabled adults we interviewed also noted that existing policies assume a baseline level of digital competency and access, which is not universally the case. As a result, there

are insufficient levels of training and support, exacerbating the challenges faced by disabled adults.

“A lot of digital knowledge is assumed, which is particularly not a good idea, for you know, anybody over 70 or 75. But even younger people, I mean, I’ve got a friend with learning difficulties who is autistic as well, and their digital skills are very minimal, so I don’t think anything should be assumed.” (Sage, 50-69, neurodivergent)

Research on the digital inclusion of volunteering for disabled adults can also be applied to paid work, as both require accessible digital tools, inclusive designs, and ongoing support. Disabled participants highlighted that the digital inclusion challenges they encounter in voluntary work are often the same as, or closely related to, those they face in other areas of life, including accessing paid work.

Bibliography

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Policy recommendations for digital inclusion of disabled adults in voluntary and paid work

Short-term

- **Digital access initiatives:** Government agencies, such as the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, should implement targeted programmes to provide free or subsidised internet access and devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, computers) to disabled adults, prioritising low-income households.
- **Training workshops:** Government agencies, such as the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, should develop and promote basic digital skills training workshops specifically designed for disabled adults, focusing on essential tasks such as browsing, email, and online banking. Priority should be given to disabled adults with education below A-Level equivalent, disabled people from low-income households, and older adults.
- **Awareness campaigns:** The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should launch awareness campaigns to inform disabled people about available digital resources and support services, ensuring easy access to information through multiple channels, including non-digital communication.
- **Inclusion in policy development:** Involve disabled adults and advocacy groups in the policy-making process to ensure their voices and experiences shape digital inclusion strategies.
- **Personalised support services:** Establish ongoing, tailored digital support services that provide one-on-one assistance for disabled people, addressing their unique needs and challenges in using technology.
- **Evaluation frameworks:** Create frameworks to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of digital inclusion initiatives, ensuring adjustments are made based on feedback from disabled participants.

Long-term

- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Foster partnerships between government, voluntary organisations, and the private sector to create comprehensive strategies that address the digital divide for disabled adults across all areas of life, including work, education, and social services.

Medium-term

- **Extend the Access to Work scheme to provide support for disabled adults engaging in voluntary work, not just paid work:** This extension would enable a larger number of disabled people, especially those from lower-income households, to have equal opportunities to contribute to and benefit from voluntary activities, enhancing their wellbeing and chances of finding paid work.

About the ESRC Digital Futures at Work Research Centre

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This Policy Brief reflects the views of the authors and not those of the Digital Futures at Work Research Centre.