

## Digital divide and disabled people

1. There seem to be three interlocking factors relevant to many disabled people:

### 1.1 Disability.

- About 20% of the UK population are protected within the definition of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. This proportion is likely to grow as propensity for disability increases with age. The demographic trend means that the overall population is ageing. Currently some 40% are aged over 45 and, by 2030, 40% will be aged 50 and over.
- The substantial majority of people protected by the DDA have “hidden” disabilities ranging from HIV and cancer through hearing impairments and mental health conditions to the huge range of medical conditions that limit day-to-day activities in the long-term. People with such “hidden” disabilities tend to encounter the most negative attitudes from others.
- The substantial majority (70%) of disabled people acquire their impairments during their working lives. This means that many face massive changes: in their careers, incomes, family arrangements and more.

### 1.2 Poverty.

- About 50% of working age disabled people depend on social security benefits for their income.
- The majority of disabled people live on incomes below the national average.
- There is a tendency for higher proportions of disabled people to live in deprived and disadvantaged areas.

### 1.3 Low skills/low employment.

- There is a trend for disabled people to have lower levels of qualifications than others. It has been estimated that some 50% of disabled people have no qualifications whereas only about 30% of the general population have none.
- About 50% of working age disabled people are not working.
- Employment discrimination remains a significant factor for many disabled people who want to work.

1.4 Hence, it seems that there are links between disability, poverty and low skills/employment. Creating effective social inclusion and increased employment requires each of these barriers to be tackled strategically and practically.

## 2. Consequences of those barriers in relation to IT technology.

### 2.1 Disability.

- A report by BT in 2004 indicated that some 70% of disabled people were digitally excluded. This was forecast to increase from 2.4m people to 3.6m people in 2025 if exclusion continued at the same rate due to the ageing population.
- While disabled people tend to use the internet in much the same way as the general population, their usage rates are about 25% lower, less frequent and less recent.

### 2.2 Poverty.

- Internet usage rates drop even farther amongst unemployed disabled people.
- Low income can have direct impact due to the costs of IT equipment and connectivity. The costs of adaptive software and hardware can be very high and prohibitive for the minority of disabled people who need such.

- The benefits of super fast broadband can be especially relevant for some disabled people. For example, video-conferencing can be an alternative to travel. Yet, deprived areas with high numbers of disabled people may not be considered attractive markets for super fast broadband providers.

### 2.3 **Low skills/low employment.**

- People with lower general skills are also likely to have lower IT skills. They may also have less confidence and motivation to gain new skills.
- Current training provision is often not sufficiently accessible – in the broadest sense. This can include obvious factors such as training venues, equipment and software but also more subtle barriers such as trainers with limited understanding of the needs of disabled people plus the delivery styles and materials of the training itself.
- The language of IT technology can present its own barrier with new concepts and a plethora of acronyms. It has been estimated that the reading age of some 50% of the population is that of a 14 year old. Disabled people are likely to have at least a similar proportion. Yet, IT design still seems to be too focussed on others in the industry rather than this substantial customer group.

## 3. **Impact for disabled business owners.**

3.1 Disabled people often consider that self-employment through starting a business is the only route to work in the face of barriers and discrimination. Evidence includes:

- The proportion of disabled people who work and are self-employed is higher than that in the general population.
- It has been estimated that there are about half a million businesses already run by disabled people and that another 175,000 who want to work would be willing to become self-employed.

However, this route to work is only recently being recognised and publicly-funded business support for this customer group has been extremely limited. Increasing business reliance on information technology simply adds yet another potential hurdle.

3.2 **Running a business.** Having no or limited IT skills can have direct impact on disabled entrepreneurs as they endeavour to manage routine business activities. Running accounts without electronic spreadsheets, still hand-writing invoices and juggling paper files plus handling customer details without a database can all be more time-consuming and so limit business development. Although Access to Work support from Jobcentre Plus can provide adaptive technology and support workers, disabled entrepreneurs still need the training and confidence to make the best business use of technology.

3.3 **Communications.** Networking can be fundamental to a successful business. However, inclusivity is not a strong feature of most business networks and organisations. Additionally, disabled people may be considerably disadvantaged as communication becomes more reliant on technology. Their lower internet usage can mean less e-mails and website use. Other communication devices can be inaccessible. Hence, disabled business owners may be more isolated than others – losing opportunities to learn from their peers, develop their customer base and increase their market share.

3.4 **Competing for business opportunities.** If disabled people already use the internet less frequently, this route to market can be further constrained when some 80% of websites fail even basic accessibility standards. Finding new work is made even more difficult with the increasing trend of electronic tendering. Not only is language complex

and larded with jargon, but information demands may be beyond many small businesses. Adding complicated electronic forms further compounds inaccessibility. Competing for new contracts, especially in the public sector, can simply become too daunting and time-consuming to be worthwhile.

4. **Conclusion.** Disabled people can see self-employment as a means of fulfilling their potential and getting off benefits but publicly-funded business support may not adequately meet their needs. They may therefore depend on their own ingenuity to get a business launched but may still face significant barriers when competing in a technology-dominated environment. Although many may use basic IT skills, they remain on the wrong side of the digital divide. Consequently, they may rarely grow beyond the micro or lifestyle business. Even the most able entrepreneur will be constrained when denied some of the essential tools for growth.

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