Creating a Digital Bridge: Lessons and policy implications from a technology access and distribution program for low-income job seekers

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Digital Bridge Program

Distributed 197 refurbished laptops and 174 internet hotspots to low-income job seekers in 2020
Research goals

> To understand participants’ existing technology skills, sources of technology support, and what assistance they need to use their new technology
> To understand what resources organizations need to support participants with their technology
Study design

SJI

> Demographic surveys (n=180)
> Participant Northstar Digital Literacy Assessments (n=49)

UW

> Participant (n=15) audio diaries & interviews
> Case manager (n=4) audio diaries & focus group
Participant demographics reflect pandemic job loss inequities

- Average participant was 37 years old (range 18 - 64), female (61%), Black or African American (73%), and an immigrant, refugee, or asylee (54%)
- 34% were homeless (RV, street, emergency shelter, couchsurfing)
Participant technology access

> Majority only had one device - smartphone (79%) and 7% had no device at all.
> 42% had no access to Internet at all prior to Digital Bridge
Digital skill ability reflects lack of access

> Able to web search, use certain apps (YouTube, Maps, basic email) to meet basic needs
> But lack foundational computer skills (less 25% Northstar passing rates)
Resources provided by the program were NOT used

- Refurbisher technical support line
- Pre-loaded resources
- Self-paced online digital literacy lessons
Case managers added tech support on top of their other job duties
Family, friends, and social networks were used.
Participant support needs

Yes, if a virtual computer class was available, I would most definitely take it...[M]ore tech help would be great...help is really necessary. - Trina, interview
Tech attributes & participant/program needs

- Some refurbished computers had some battery issues
- Text heavy PCs were challenging for English language learners
Hotspot affordances fit SJ and participant needs

But some never got a decent signal at their home
Policy implications

- Federal and local funding needs to support program overhead AND participant support needs AND devices AND access
- And of course, more funding for digital equity research!
Thank you

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