Introduction

Our world is becoming evermore reliant on digital technology, with all signs indicating this will intensify over the coming years. While technology is disruptive, it is also transformative; it has the potential to increase disadvantage, but also to lessen it. What matters is how we use it, and, in the case of digital technology, that we have the skills and capacity to harness its benefits. Sadly, those who are unable to access and master digital technology will find themselves increasingly excluded from the world around them, which will further exacerbate existing social exclusion and economic disadvantage. Digital inclusion is fundamental to creating and strengthening independence and autonomy, but its transformative power transcends the individual and bestows widespread social and economic benefits on broader society.¹

Leap is dedicated to achieving equality of access to, and use of, digital technologies for the most vulnerable members of our community – those at greatest risk of social exclusion for whom digital technology can offer truly life-changing benefits.

The Digital Divide

The term ‘digital divide’ refers to the gap in opportunities to access information and communication technologies. We know that digital inclusion correlates with economic and social inclusion. Indeed, there is a digital divide between richer and poorer Australians, and those with low levels of income, education and employment are significantly less likely to be digitally included.

While the digital divide in Australia is narrowing, with 86% of households having access to the internet in 2014-15 compared to only 56% in 2004-05, there are still 14% of Australian households – 1.3 million homes – who aren’t connected to the internet. For people with disability, the digital divide is even greater, with only 70.9% having access to the internet at home, and only 58.4% having actually accessed the internet at home in the previous 12 months according to a 2012 ABS survey. This means nearly 1 million people with disability don’t have access to the internet.

The situation is even bleaker for older Australians, with the ABS 2015 ‘Household Use of Information Technology’ study showing that 48.8% had not used the internet in the previous week. Similarly, people aged 65 and over had the lowest digital ability score compared to every other demographic in the 2016 Australian Digital Inclusion Index, and 75% of this cohort reported feeling confused about using technology.

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4 ABS, ‘8146.0 – Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2014-15’.
5 ABS, ‘8146.0 – Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2004-05’.
8 ABS, ‘8146.0 – Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2014-15’.
These people – those who are already disadvantaged and vulnerable – are at risk of being left even further behind as the world moves deeper into the digital age. It is this compounding of existing disadvantage that concerns us most.

The Costs of Digital Exclusion

We've understood for a long time that literacy is crucial for being able to fully participate in modern societies, but in our information society, digital literacy is just as important. People who lack digital literacy risk social, economic and political exclusion now that information and communication technologies play key roles in employment, education, and civic engagement, as well in leisure and entertainment.11 Digital technology has the potential to reduce social and economic disadvantage in vulnerable cohorts by facilitating social connection, improving access to services, and alleviating barriers to employment for people who have difficulty working away from home.

The impact of digital technology on economic productivity is well documented.12 In a study of the interaction between labour force participation and digital technology, 66% of people with a disability who were not in the labour force indicated they would take up a telework employment opportunity if it was available to them.13 Similarly, 74% of people not in the labour force due to carer responsibilities would be able to telework if it was an option, and 70% of people living in remote and regional areas who were not in the labour force would take up employment if telework was available.14 And 60% of mature workers reported that

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14 Deloitte Access Economics and Colmar Brunton Research, p.i.
they would take up telework and delay their retirement by an average of 6.6 years if such an opportunity was available to them.\textsuperscript{15}

We know that information and communications technology has a positive effect on economic growth, and provides real productivity gains for government.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, Deloitte has estimated that internet and digital technologies potentially contributed between $45 and $92 billion to the Australian economy in 2013, approximately 2.9\% to 5.9\% of GDP.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, a 10 percentage point increase in broadband penetration rates (a proxy for digital technology development) is projected to result in a 0.9 to 1.5 percentage point increase in annual per capita growth.\textsuperscript{18}

Digital technologies create such good efficiencies that the NSW Government has made it a priority to increase the level of online government transactions to 70\% by 2018-19, up from 44\% in 2013-14.\textsuperscript{19} The Commonwealth Government is similarly focussing on online transactions via MyGov.\textsuperscript{20} With more of our interactions with government needing to take place online – from vehicle registrations to Medicare and Centrelink – it is critical that all members of our community have the digital skills necessary to engage with government services in this way.

A population with good digital literacy skills translates to better employment opportunities, economic growth, cost savings and social inclusion. But these benefits are only realised when we have equality of access to digital technology and the skills to know how to use it.

\textsuperscript{15} Deloitte Access Economics and Colmar Brunton Research, pp.18-19.
\textsuperscript{17} Deloitte Access Economics, p.14.
\textsuperscript{18} Deloitte Access Economics, p.2.
\textsuperscript{19} See https://www.nsw.gov.au/premiers-priorities
\textsuperscript{20} See https://my.gov.au/mygov/content/html/about.html
The Key Barriers to Digital Inclusion

Beyond entertainment and communication, digital technology is increasingly viewed as an integral mode of delivery for a broad range of information and services, particularly from government. This amplifies the need for equality of access and use of digital technologies, yet some of the most vulnerable members of our community – those most likely to need government services – frequently face barriers when it comes to information and communication technologies. The ABS’ 2015 ‘Household Use of Information Technology’ survey (HUIT) identified the main reasons for households not having internet access as: no need (63%), lack of confidence or knowledge (22%) and cost (16%). In households with children under the age of 15, cost was the primary reason for lacking internet access, whereas in households without children under 15, the primary reason was believing there to be no need.

The reasons for digital exclusion identified in the HUIT survey can be separated into four main categories: access, motivation, skills and trust.

Access
Lack of access to information and communication technology is frequently due to cost, as noted in the HUIT survey, but it also encompasses physical capacity and geographic connectivity.

Motivation
When people don’t understand the benefits of the internet, they lack the motivation to develop the skills and knowledge needed to get the most out of digital technologies. The motivation to connect, learn and explore will develop as people understand how information and communication technologies can make their lives richer, more efficient, and more cost effective. As digital technology moves from a professional tool into an everyday device, it is even more essential

that people understand the possibilities, consequences, and benefits it enables.\(^{22}\)

Key benefits of being online include the ability to access and manage government services; paying bills quickly and easily; purchasing groceries and other goods; connecting with family and friends; discovering events and communities of interest; accessing news and weather information; participating in online courses; finding and applying for jobs; and watching TV or movies on demand.

**Skills**

The motivation to become digitally literate – to acquire the basic digital skills that are needed to use digital technology – will develop once the benefits to be gained from digital technology are clear.

Doteveryone has created a Basic Digital Skills Framework that explains the skills everyone needs to become digitally literate.\(^{23}\) Centred on five skill sets, the Framework identifies what every individual should be able to accomplish using digital technology, and supports organisations to use a common understanding of digital literacy. At Leep, we have adopted the Basic Digital Skills Framework as the starting point for our work and we recommend it to other organisations delivering digital capability programs.

**Trust**

Many people, especially the most vulnerable members of our community such as older people, are suspicious of digital technology and feel confused or threatened by it.\(^{24}\) Understanding when to trust a website with personal details and how to use virus protection software are key skills people need in order to feel comfortable about getting online.

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\(^{23}\) See: [https://doteveryone.org.uk/digital-skills/digital-skills-framework/](https://doteveryone.org.uk/digital-skills/digital-skills-framework/)

Addressing issues of access, motivation, skills and trust in the digital space is crucial for ensuring that everyone benefits in the digital age. Leep’s vision is for a digitally inclusive society, where no one is left behind.
How Leep Can Help

Leep uses a competence-based approach to bridging the digital divide. Digital competence can be understood as the set of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for engaging with information and communication technologies.\(^\text{25}\)

In collaboration with our partners, we run digital literacy programs for and with our communities to help them better understand and access our digital world.

- We design and run **tailored digital literacy learning** to support your clients and customers who are digitally excluded.

- We support organisations with **advice and learning materials** so that you can run your own digital inclusion programs or make your current programs more effective.

- We can help you **set up a technology drop-in centre** to support your clients to access your online resources, communications and services.

- We support **community access to devices** through libraries and community centres.

- We support access to the internet by providing **advice on public Wi-Fi connection spots** such as libraries, community centres and shopping centres.

For more information, or to find out how we can help – get in touch!

Contact
Cecily Michaels
Chief Executive Officer
Phone: 4721 1866 (ext. 221)
Email: CecilyM@leep.ngo