

DIGITAL INCLUSION AND COVID-19

CSI Response

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Australia's response to containing COVID-19 needs us to be more digitally connected than ever. Yet, more than 2.5 million Australians are not online, and many of those who are lack the skills to benefit fully from this connectivity. Affordable access to the internet also remains a key concern, particularly for low income households.

Many Australian small businesses and organisations are also limited in their digital access and capacity. This fact sheet focuses on the need for:

ACCESS | AFFORDABILITY | ABILITY

Digital inclusion occurs when we have both the ability and opportunity to use online technologies effectively. The key features of digital inclusion are:

- **Access** – the availability, quality, capacity and flexibility of an internet connection, hardware, and sufficient data allowances
- **Affordability** – relative to overall costs of living or business operations, and to the value of expenditure on internet data
- **Ability** – including the attitudes and skills to confidently use online technologies in diverse ways

Digital inclusion is improving in Australia. Results from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index show overall inclusion rising 7.9 points, from 54.0 in 2014 to 61.9 in 2019ⁱⁱ. But we know that some people are missing out:

- Australians with lower levels of income, education, and employment are significantly less digitally included, as are people over 65, Indigenous Australians, and people with disability;
- In a collaborative project between WACOSS community sector partners and UWA including CSI UWA which looked at 400 Western Australians experiencing entrenched disadvantage, we found that only 56.0% of family members reported they had access to the internet at home, with 1/3 reporting they did not have access to the internet at home because they couldn't afford itⁱⁱⁱ;
- People with mobile-only internet access – which typically includes those with lower incomes and people experiencing homelessness – are less digitally included than the population as a whole;
- Digital inclusion in Australia is also characterised by a city/country divide, with digital inclusion in 2019 8.1 points higher in capital cities (63.8) than in country areas (55.7).

Digital inclusion also varies for organisations:

- Digital capabilities and the adoption of technology remains low among Australia's small to medium businesses^{iv};
- While nearly 68% of Australian charities believe online technologies to be very important for the future of giving and volunteering, only 20% feel they are currently using these technologies well, with lack of human and financial resources seen as the key barriers^v;

DIGITAL NEEDS AND COVID-19

Our national response to containing the impacts of COVID-19 has radically accelerated our need for digital inclusion.

- Across Australia, we are being asked to work, study, and recreate from home as much as possible;
- Schools and universities are rapidly transforming their courses and curricula, aiming to deliver education fully online;
- Many businesses and organisations still able to operate are 'pivoting' to provide goods and services online;
- Telehealth services are being extended to support the population's health needs while minimizing exposure for health workers and reducing physical demand on health services;
- The huge and rapid growth of unemployment means many are turning to the internet to access

social security and welfare services.

While digital demands are increasing, we are also facing some significant constraints to effective access:

- Many sites of internet access – such as public libraries and workplaces – are being shut down to minimize the spread of the virus;
- Both the mobile and fixed broadband networks will come under increasing strain^{vi} and it remains to be seen how these networks will cope;
- Some essential service providers – particularly in the not for profit sector – have very limited resources to direct to online services, while many of the community members they serve are not online at home.

WHAT DO WE NEED FOR BETTER DIGITAL INCLUSION?

Australia's telecommunication companies are seeking to respond to the current crisis in a number of ways, including through the free provision of additional data allowances to consumers^{vii}. Better provisions will assist some Australians to attain higher capacity and more affordable access.

Establishing connections for those not currently online is likely to prove challenging as will assisting people with limited digital skills to effectively navigate their way through an increasingly online economic, social, civic and cultural life.

We believe there is an fundamental and immediate need for a coordinated effort from government, telecommunication providers and not for profits to assist older Australians to get online and gain the confidence and basic skills they need to remain socially connected through a time in which they have been asked to take particular care in remaining socially isolated.

We also call upon philanthropy to support the capacity of charities to work in this area, and public and private service providers to consider alternative channels – including telephone, mail and face to face support where allowable – to ensure that people and organisations experiencing digital exclusion are not left further behind.

i ABS, 2018, *Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2016-17*, Cat 8146.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 28 March.

ii Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2019, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*: RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra

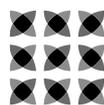
iii Seivwright, A., and Flatau, P. (2019). Insights into hardship and disadvantage in Perth, Western Australia: The 100 Families WA Baseline Report. The 100 Families WA project (Anglicare, Centrecare, Jacaranda Community Centre, Mercycare, Ruah Community Services, UnitingCare West, Wanslea, WACOSS, the University of Western Australia (Centre for Social Impact and the School of Population and Global Health), Perth, Western Australia: 100 Families WA <https://100familieswa.org.au/resources/100-families-wa-baseline-report/> p15.

iv Small Business Digital Taskforce (2018) *Report to Government March 2019*. Online at https://www.industry.gov.au/sites/default/files/small_business_digital_taskforce_-_report_to_government.pdf?acsf_files_redirect [accessed 24/3/2020]

v Crittall, Marie, Katie McDonald, Myles McGregor-Lowndes, Wendy Scaife, Jo Barraket, Rachel Sloper and Alexandra Williamson with Christopher Baker. 2017. *Giving and volunteering: the nonprofit perspective. Giving Australia 2016* report series commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. Brisbane, Queensland: The Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies, Queensland University of Technology, Centre for Social Impact Swinburne University of Technology, and the Centre for Corporate Public Affairs.

vi Angus, Simon. 2020. *How Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) Is Putting A Strain On Global Internet Networks*, Impact – Monash University, 18 March - <https://www2.monash.edu/impact/articles/big-data/how-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-is-putting-a-strain-on-global-internet-networks/> [accessed 24/3/2020]

vii <https://www.commsalliance.com.au/hot-topics/covid-19>



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