

Digital Access to Programs and Services

In the Employment and Training Sector

White Paper



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June 2021

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Introduction

For such an innocuous word, change often invokes a feeling of fear. When things have been a certain way for a certain amount of time, we achieve consistency; we grow accustomed to this consistency and the rest of our lives are built around it.

The pandemic has been a game changer. Change is inevitable. Like it or not, we now **truly** live in a digital world. And in order to survive, and with intention, thrive, we all need to be part of this world. We need an inclusive digital world where all can access, not just the fortunate among us. We need to change how we think and shift our perceptions.

ETHOS has been a leader in our industry with online and hybrid/blended learning. Our first interactive, independent online job search workshops were developed for the industry in 2004. Since that time we have continuously evolved to working with Learning Management Systems (LMS) and other more recent tools, as we work with our Learning, Innovation and Technology Team to turn possibilities into reality. However, the stark reality is that digital access concerns affect us and impede progress for our clients.

Attention is now being paid to these issues but much more needs to be done. It is up to those of us already working in this space to set a standard and ensure that others, including funders, are made aware, and step forward to take action.

Like the many social justice issues evolving as I write, the time is now and the responsibility rests with us.

Photo Credit - Layne Anvelt

Our Response

ETHOS Programs and Services

ETHOS runs a number of programs and services, with several different funders. Some initiatives are large, client varied and comprehensive, such as WorkBC, but most are dedicated to Inclusion groups and delivered as a hybrid model. It is these smaller contracts that have been delivered online and virtually during the pandemic where we knew we had to take a closer look.

We chose two programs, one employment and one self-employment focused, to review and determine where we stood in relation to client digital access. We spoke with Managers and staff from these programs, as well as put out surveys for staff, program clients and overall ETHOS clients. While not an exact science, here is what we found:

Clients

- 80% of clients had little or moderate experience with online and virtual delivery
- 91% liked both online and virtual delivery or had no preference
- 54% preferred asynchronous learning or had no preference
- 25% had digital access issues
- 54% experienced ZOOM fatigue
- 21% live in a rural or remote location
- 42% identified as marginal or were not sure
- Low bandwidth, insufficient data, financial capacity, lack of skills and no equipment were listed as barriers to access.

Staff:

- 32% of clients face barriers to digital access
- 47% of marginalized clients face barriers to access
- 49% of rural and remote clients face barriers to access
- 89% say we have lost clients because of access
- 10% of clients have left because of access issues

While we have not listed all of the data, what is shown clearly indicates issues with digital access, for both clients and staff. Note that supplementary data is available by request.

Our Plan

A Team Approach



ETHOS is a partner with ASPECT in a Future Skills Project to address Career Practitioner competencies with online and virtual delivery. ³ This was an ETHOS initiative brought forward to ASPECT, where we unwittingly started our "Plan" to address digital access. How we deliver is one of the issues associated with digital access.

In considering next steps, we wanted to be focused and intentional. We developed policy and process to address the loan and purchase of computers for clients. Headsets and other related equipment are being provided to clients.

We are making space available for clients to come into our offices and use computers if bandwidth is an issue.

We have shared information on free and inexpensive programs that clients can access for data. Staff continue to look at options with major providers and talk to other Service Providers for ideas.

We have hired three Instructional Design Interns, at our own cost, to work with our RiseUP and Rebel Entrepreneur Teams. They will work with program Subject Matter Experts (SME's) to move delivery from a heavy focus on synchronous, to more asynchronous on our LMS's, and decrease our use of video conferencing (ZOOM), PowerPoint and PDF's. Our goal is to have the first two programs revised by the end of summer and move onto others by Fall.

One step at a time we are making progress.

Photo Credit - Pixabay

3. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/projects/career-development-practitioners>

Our Recommendations

The pandemic changed the world as we once saw it. Those who were nimble and prepared, quickly responded and were able to pivot. Others struggled to figure out next steps. And now that we have had a chance to ponder and reflect, we see where divides have happened and inequities have grown.

Our research tells us that many individuals are struggling to access online and virtual services. Survey data in this paper would indicate that 25% of clients have expressed experiencing challenges with digital access. Staff who work with clients feel that the range is more in the neighbourhood of 32-49% for clients facing digital access barriers. Furthermore, 89% of staff told us that we have lost clients as a result of difficulties accessing technology, and 10% of clients have exited our programs. These numbers are significant.

We use an LMS in all programs, combined with video conferencing. We have the tools to adjust our programming. Virtual and online delivery are here to stay, however, those in our industry rely heavily on just ZOOM for virtual delivery, which we now know to be a contributing factor to the divide. PowerPoint is a standard tool, as is the use of PDF handout. Many organizations do not have the resources to purchase equipment or pay for client data. Services Providers in our industry are unaware of how tools and delivery methods can impact digital access for clients.

Governments need to take accountability for a lack of research and response. To leave these matters in the hands of contractors who are often ill-equipped to understand and solve these issues is fraught with peril. We risk losing clients to the system, as well as to systemic inequities.

Policy related to digital access and technology needs to be developed at all levels of government. A framework for delivery should be considered to guide those with little understanding. More funding for client equipment and Service Provider tools are other considerations. Delivery on a LMS, Content Management System (CMS) or related platform is a necessity, as is the need to allow more asynchronous programming. And training on digital skills for both contractors and clients is an absolute must.

Instructional Designers hired by the government to help navigate the digital world would be a positive step, including having them involved in discussions relating to policy and procedure. Note that Instructional Designer is an occupation not currently included in National Occupational Codes (NOC).

The world is changing so quickly that it's hard to keep up. Perhaps things seem more complicated now, or unjust and unfair. But sound planning, analyses of trends and research can help shape meaningful policies.

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