Research report

Digital Exclusion & Assisted Digital Research

To understand digital access, use and skills among the UK population

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17.08.2015

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About Chief Digital Information Officer (CDIO)

CDIO Group leads HMRC's journey to become a digital business, in line with the Government Digital Strategy.

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Research requirement (background to the project)

The purpose of this research was to help government departments better understand digital access, use and skills amongst the UK population, micro-businesses and those who are self-employed. The outcomes of the research have helped government departments refine and implement their digital service strategies in an era where increasing numbers of government services are being made available online. In particular, this research provides information about the number and needs of citizens and small businesses that will require assistance to use government digital services.

When the research took place

The research was conducted between November 2014 and January 2015, using a combination of multiple waves of the TNS UK Omnibus and Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI).

Who did the work (research agency)

TNS-BMRB

Method, Data and Tools used, Sample

The research compromised of:

  a. A face to face survey of **4,000 members of the UK public**, with additional boosting of interviews with four key target groups, namely self-employed with no other employees and three groups of tax payers of particular interest to HMRC.

  b. A telephone survey of **500 micro-businesses with one to four employees**

Main Findings

One of the key objectives for the research was to quantify and understand the Digitally Excluded population. Digital Exclusion is defined as having no use of the internet – predominantly because of a lack of access at home (or in their place of work for businesses), or for a small minority because of no use despite having access. **Amongst the UK general population, 15% are Digitally Excluded – equivalent to over 7 million adults**. There are Digitally Excluded people within all parts of society, but older people and those from lower social grades are more likely to be so. There is no difference in levels of Digital Exclusion between urban and rural areas, but there are some small regional variations (higher levels in the West Midlands and South West).

Access issues are the most common form of barrier to internet use (affecting four in five Digitally Excluded), but motivational barriers are a significant issue both in terms of their prevalence (affecting around half of the Digitally Excluded population) but also in the difficulty with which they can be addressed. **Attitudes towards the internet are generally negative amongst the Digitally Excluded**, reflected in results showing a majority of Digitally Excluded have not attempted to, and are unlikely to seek to, improve their internet skills.
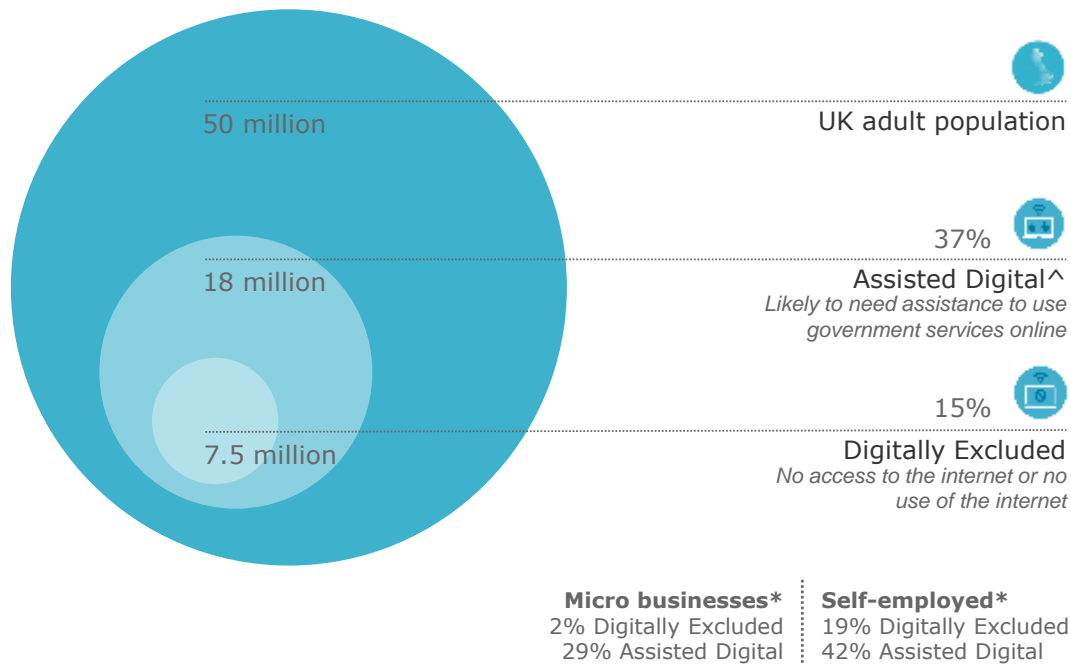
Digital Exclusion is much lower amongst micro-businesses with one to four employees (2%), but higher amongst the self-employed with no employees (19%). Many of the digitally excluded self-employed felt the internet was not relevant to their business.

The other key group this research seeks to understand is the Assisted Digital. These are people and businesses that may be expected to need some assistance to interact with government online. This is based on those who need assistance to carry out three interactions with government online: provide basic information, make a payment, and provide detailed information, but also includes all those who are Digitally Excluded (as these people do not currently use the internet). **Almost two in five (37%) of the UK general public are Assisted Digital – equivalent to over 18 million adults[1].**

Assisted Digital is much lower amongst micro-businesses with one to four employees (29%), and many would be able to interact online alone or with help from colleagues, **but the Assisted Digital population is greater amongst the self-employed with no employees (42%)**.

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[1] It is important to note that the definition of Assisted Digital includes those respondents who selected help from family and friends at one or more of the three scenarios. While it is possible that government help may be needed at some point, these people may not immediately need government provided assistance to use services online (their first port of call for help being their friends or family). On this basis, the definition of the Assisted Digital population is, arguably, the broadest possible

Fig 1.1: Digitally Excluded and Assisted Digital populations

50 million — UK adult population

37% — Assisted Digital^
Likely to need assistance to use government services online

18 million

15% — Digitally Excluded
No access to the internet or no use of the internet

7.5 million

Micro businesses* | **Self-employed***
2% Digitally Excluded | 19% Digitally Excluded
29% Assisted Digital | 42% Assisted Digital

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^ All those who are DE are also AD. Of the 15% who are DE, 1% were not AD based on their separate responses to three scenarios involving interacting with government services online (i.e. they did not indicate they would need help to do so) but because they are DE they are also considered AD; 14% of DE are AD as a result of their separate responses to three scenarios.
*Micro-businesses with one to four employees and self-employed with no employees. These respondents were asked about their internet usage for their business and assistance needs for their business, not their personal usage and needs.

The Assisted Digital population is not homogenous though. There is greater prevalence of older people and those from lower Social Grades in the Assisted Digital population, but the profile is much more mixed than for the Digitally Excluded. As with Digital Exclusion, there is no difference in the levels of Assisted Digital between rural and urban areas. There are **four Assisted Digital segments**, ranging from those who say they could interact with government online alone or with help from friends and family to those who say they couldn't do anything online with government even with help.

Fig 1.2: Assisted Digital segments

AD Friends & Family 16%	AD Confident 1%	AD Other 10%	AD Unable 10%
Those who say they could do all three scenarios with help from friends and family, or some without help	Those who say they could do all three scenarios on their own but are Digitally Excluded	Those who gave a mix of responses across the three scenarios	Those who say they could not do any of the three scenarios even with help

People are generally unlikely to need more assistance to complete a government task (e.g. paying for car tax online) than for an equivalent non-government task (e.g. paying for a product online), but the **complexity of the service has some bearing on the need for assistance**. This applies across individuals, self-employed and micro-businesses, and is more pronounced amongst those who are Assisted Digital. This is important for government departments to remember when considering the possible impact of Assisted Digital on their services – those departments with typically more complex services/interactions are likely to have a slightly bigger Assisted Digital population amongst their customers.

Fig 1.3: Digitally Excluded and Assisted Digital penetration levels across key groups/departments

Groups	Total (4,017)	Self-employed^ (327)	Micro-businesses^ (505)	Tax payer (2,505)	Rural (817)	UK Passport holder (3,072)	Visa applicant (152)
DE	15%	19%	2%	10%	17%	13%	5%
AD	37%	42%	29%	29%	38%	33%	26%

> ! **DE and AD highest among self-employed and lowest amongst microbusinesses, tax payers and visa applicants***

Small base sizes for visa applicants

TNS © TNS ^Micro-businesses with one to four employees and self-employed with no employees. These respondents were asked about their internet usage for their business and assistance needs for their business, not their personal usage and needs.

The proportion of adults who have accessed government services online is similar to the proportion that has accessed government services in general. Digitally Excluded and Assisted Digital are less likely to have interacted with the government both in general and, as would be expected, online. The findings suggest that there may **be an increase in those using government services online in the future**, particularly willingness to transact with government online. This is consistent for all adults, including DE and AD (although they are building from a much smaller base of course).

Table 1.1: Interaction with government services in the last year and online in the future

Groups	UK General Population (4,017)	Digitally Excluded (806)	Assisted Digital (1,685)	Non-Assisted Digital (2,332)
Looked for information				
Any method	61%	16%	38%	75%
Online	57%	5%	30%	73%
Online in the future	61%	7%	32%	78%
Used service				
Any method	54%	14%	32%	67%
Online	50%	5%	24%	65%

| Online in the future | 63% | 9% | 33% | 80% |

An individual's **online access, motivation to use the internet and online skills influences their confidence to use online services** and the level of assistance they need. The degree of help and support is **further influenced by the wider support** an individual has access to or is willing to use (such as friends and family or online support methods).

The combination of these factors influences how an individual will approach digital assistance – the route to it, the stage of engagement where it is necessary and the type of assistance required.

Those in the AD Friends and Family segment are more likely to prefer and be able to call on wider support to help them online, whereas the AD Unable group is much more likely to need significant support generally and may not, even with help, be able to use services online.

Government could use a **combination of push and pull factors to encourage people to go online and use services**. The main factors that would encourage people to use government services online are **necessity** to access services online (removing alternatives or, at least, making it harder to use alternatives), increased **awareness** of which services are available and making services **easy to use**. While there is clearly existing use and appetite for future use of government services online amongst the general population, **62% of Digitally Excluded says nothing would make them more likely to use the internet for government services**. Even though there are practical steps government departments can take to encourage people, for a small minority changing behaviour will be incredibly challenging.

Most micro-businesses with one to four employees (92%) have used government online services. Even amongst Assisted Digital micro-businesses around three-quarters have accessed government online services in the last 12 months. **Proportions amongst self-employed with no employees are lower, but half are currently using government online services** and the survey findings suggest that this may increase in the future. Key factors that would encourage use of online services are the same as for the general public: necessity, awareness and ease of use. Only 12% of self-employed said nothing would make them more likely to use the internet for government services. So, while for some very small businesses there may be challenges to

Fig 1.4: Model of digital assistance

SOURCE: Model based on a range of attitudinal and experience questions

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them using government services online, there is clearly appetite.

Individuals would **most commonly try to teach themselves to use government services online**, but many will **seek support from friends and family**. Friends and family is a very important source of help for those Digitally Excluded who would consider interacting with government online, but nearly half wouldn't. Assisted Digital are also most likely to turn to friends and family (if available), but some will use online support. While friends and family are a useful source of support, this may lead to reliance on them rather than 'upskilling' through independent use.

Online sources of help are very important in reducing the burden on telephone helplines, but also in helping to give people confidence and skills to use online services independently. **Online help pages are the most popular form of web based support**, but approaching a third (31%) of the UK population selected at least one of the three online options presented. Amongst the Assisted Digital population, the preference for online help options is most noticeable for the AD Other group (perhaps a reflection of preference, or a lack of wider support from friends and family).

Amongst micro-businesses the most prominent choice of help is to try to work it out for themselves, likely with the assistance of online help pages or other forms of online support. Micro-businesses are also likely to turn to telephone helplines for support, likely either to address more complex needs or where wider support from friends/family or colleagues, has been exhausted.

The most selected option for self-employed is also to teach themselves/work it out, followed by seeking help from friends and family, Online support options and a government helpline are a preference for a minority.

Table 1.2: Preferences for online forms of support[2]

Groups	UK General Population (4,017)	Digitally Excluded (806)	Assisted Digital (1,685)	Non-Assisted Digital (2,332)
Online help pages	13%	1%	7%	17%
Watch an online video	11%	1%	7%	13%
Use online help (e.g. web chat)	8%	1%	7%	13%
Any online support method	*31%*	*3%*	*18%*	*38%*

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[2] Question wording: The Government is starting to put all of its services online, for example submitting tax returns [or claiming benefits/providing business support]. If you wanted help or support with online government services, which, if any, of the following would you be most likely to choose? Maximum three answer codes.

As with any changes, **roll out of digital services will likely increase demand**, at least in the short term, and departments need to plan for this. For most Assisted Digital, if they can't solve the problem themselves or with support from those around them or online options, a **telephone helpline is the default alternative/secondary option** they will turn to. When designing and delivering telephone help services, it may be useful for departments to **'triage' calls sensitively.** The most appropriate response can be determined through careful exploration of the issue an individual or business needs help with, what they have done so far to try to resolve this, and what their general digital capability is (aiming to not over or underservice the customer).

It may be valuable to encourage those who 'can', to go online first and 'have a go', rather than automatically doing something for a customer. However, it also may be the case that when a customer uses a telephone helpline, they have exhausted other 'light touch' avenues (e.g. friends and family, web based support), so **those who make contact may need more intensive support**. Additionally, departments may find it useful in the long term to use telephone support as a way to **'educate' users rather than just resolving the immediate need,** so customers can be independent next time. Investing in helping those who want help to do it themselves, with extra guidance and/or signposting to other sources should build confidence/ability across all online government services.

Third parties may be useful for access, training and assistance with a specific problem.

Micro-businesses appear to be more self-sufficient; if they can't work it out themselves they will likely turn to online assistance or friends and family/colleagues, but may also use telephone helplines. The self-employed are likely, if they can't work it out themselves or with support from friends and family, to phone a government helpline. There is a small proportion that would use online forms of help.

When thinking about the implications of this research, and in particular how to apply the findings in specific government departments, there are some key questions to consider:

- **How does the typical customer profile for a department compare to the profile of Digitally Excluded and Assisted Digital?**

While there are people who are Digital Excluded and Assisted Digital in all parts of society, including some micro-businesses and self-employed, there are some more likely not to use the internet or to need help to use government services. Does the department have a typical customer type/types that can be mapped onto the profile of the Digitally Excluded or Assisted Digital?

- **What is the nature of the government service?**

The research shows that the complexity of a service will impact on the number of customers who need digital assistance. But previous qualitative research has also shown that an individual's confidence in the subject matter of the service can influence their likelihood to

need assistance. The complexity, frequency and continuity of the service/requirements will all impact on the need/demand for assistance, beyond it simply being online.

- **What existing (i.e. non-digital) support is currently provided?**

For some customers, digital assistance will overlap with other help and support they already receive or otherwise need. For example, some businesses choose to outsource their tax services, and as such, require general government service assistance, not specific digital assistance. Assistance may be needed because the service is online, but it may be needed for some other reason (even if on the surface it appears to be a digital issue). Therefore dovetailing digital and other assistance will be important, alongside 'triaging' calls sensitively.

- **How will the new services be promoted?**

Awareness is one way to encourage more people, including the Assisted Digital, to use online services, so departments should consider how the message about digital options is communicated, and also what that message is (both service specific and support related).

The ultimate goal for Assisted Digital programmes within government departments, beyond providing immediate help to those who need it with online services, is to **enable customers to use the internet to interact with government independently**. There will be some individuals and small businesses that cannot – either due to an access issue, a lack of motivation, or a shortfall in skills. However, a lack of independent use of online services can be addressed, to differing degrees within the Assisted Digital population, through the support and help provided.

Those in the **AD Friends and Family** group are the least likely to be dependent on government digital assistance. They are more likely to have access, some internet skills and the motivation to interact online, but importantly they are also more likely to have a wider support network to call upon for help. This support network does, though, mean they may be harder to encourage to become independent in their online interactions. But even for this group, government help, likely in the form of telephone helplines, is most likely to be needed for complex services/interactions where wider support has already been exhausted.

For those in the **AD Unable** group, who are currently unable to use online government services, even with help, a majority have little prospect of doing so in the future. Three quarters of this group are Digitally Excluded, and it is likely that they are the types of customers already receiving support with services, regardless of whether they are online. The AD Unable group account for 10% of adults (7% of self-employed, less than 1% of micro-businesses), for who little can be done to encourage them to go online, and who will need general, not digital, support.

The third Assisted Digital segment, **AD Other**, are somewhere in between AD Unable and AD Friends and Family. Their ability to use government services online independently will depend

on their circumstances and the complexity of the service/requirement. They are currently likely to be more dependent on government assistance as they are less able or willing to turn to friends and family, but circumstances mean they are likely to offer greater potential to encourage them to become more self-sufficient in future as they have a greater preference for online support.

The final Assisted Digital segment, **AD Confident**, is a very small group who are Digitally Excluded, but feel that they would be able to complete each digital task independently. They form just 1% of the total population, and as such are too small a group to conduct analysis on.

Amongst micro-businesses that are Assisted Digital, there is an even split between those who are AD colleague, who believe they can do each of the three digital tasks on their own or with the help of colleagues, and those whose need for support is likely to be dependent on the service in question, AD Other. Only a tiny proportion of micro-businesses are AD Unable or AD Confident. For the self-employed, AD Friends and Family and AD Other make up the greatest proportion of the Assisted Digital population, but there is a noticeable, if small, proportion who are AD Confident or AD Unable.