

Racing to get everyone online



Simon Bailey is on the starting block as the UK prepares to step up the challenge of online access for all ■

What's your email address? Please visit our web site at www.rrv.net, join our Facebook group... – being able to answer, visit or join means that you are digitally included. Imagine if you weren't – how would you survive in today's technological and digital environment?

What if by getting everybody online and digitally included in this country we would not need to have any austerity cuts to the welfare state?

The Labour government was very fond of digital inclusion, with one of its last visions being a connected digital economy. At the heart of this economy was going to be a new MyGov portal, whereby every citizen would in effect have a personal website for the majority of their interactions with the state.

However, it's all been very quiet on the e-government front since the new coalition government came to power. In fact, the biggest news story is that Martha Lane Fox has been reappointed as the UK digital champion. One of her remits is to continue the Race Online 2012 campaign, which she founded, to encourage as many people as possible to get online.

Ms Lane Fox will have a seat on the Efficiency Board, which is co-chaired by the Cabinet Office Minister, Francis Maude, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander. The board will oversee the government's efficiency and reform programme. The very word efficiency seems to infer that the board is looking for savings.

What is clear from this board's remit and the lack of activity around the use of the internet for government interaction is that there is little or no money for further investment in schemes that would promote digital inclusion. But can a government run the country where ten million of its citizens are digitally disadvantaged?

David Cameron has commented that, *"In the internet age, we need to ensure that people aren't being left behind as more and*

more services and business move online. But this issue isn't just about fairness as Martha's work shows, promoting digital inclusion is essential for a dynamic modern economy and can help to make government more efficient and effective."

So what is digital inclusion and why is it important? The UK has 40 million internet users, with 30 million people using the web every day, and it has some of the world's cheapest broadband prices. Half of all leisure travel is now booked online, and seven million job adverts were placed online last year.

The UK has some of the most sophisticated web users in the world in terms of our willingness to communicate and transact online:

- 58% of UK adults buy goods and services online, the highest in Europe, and they spent an estimated £4.4bn online in April 2010. Over 38 million people have used ebay.co.uk, and seven million of us have sold something on the site
- The UK is the largest online travel market in Europe, with 87% making travel plans over the internet. We book more than half our leisure travel online at an estimated annual value of £17bn
- There are over 25m active Facebook accounts in the UK – only the USA has more.

However, there are still ten million adults in the UK who have never used the internet. To put this in perspective, that number is equivalent to the combined size of the entire population of our five biggest cities.

What's worse is that four million of those are among the most disadvantaged:

- 39% are over 65
- 38% are unemployed
- 19% are families with children.

It has been revealed that use of the web decreases with age and increases with income. While only 10% of 16 to 24 year olds are offline, this rises to 50% of 65 to 74 year olds. Other characteristics of non-users are:

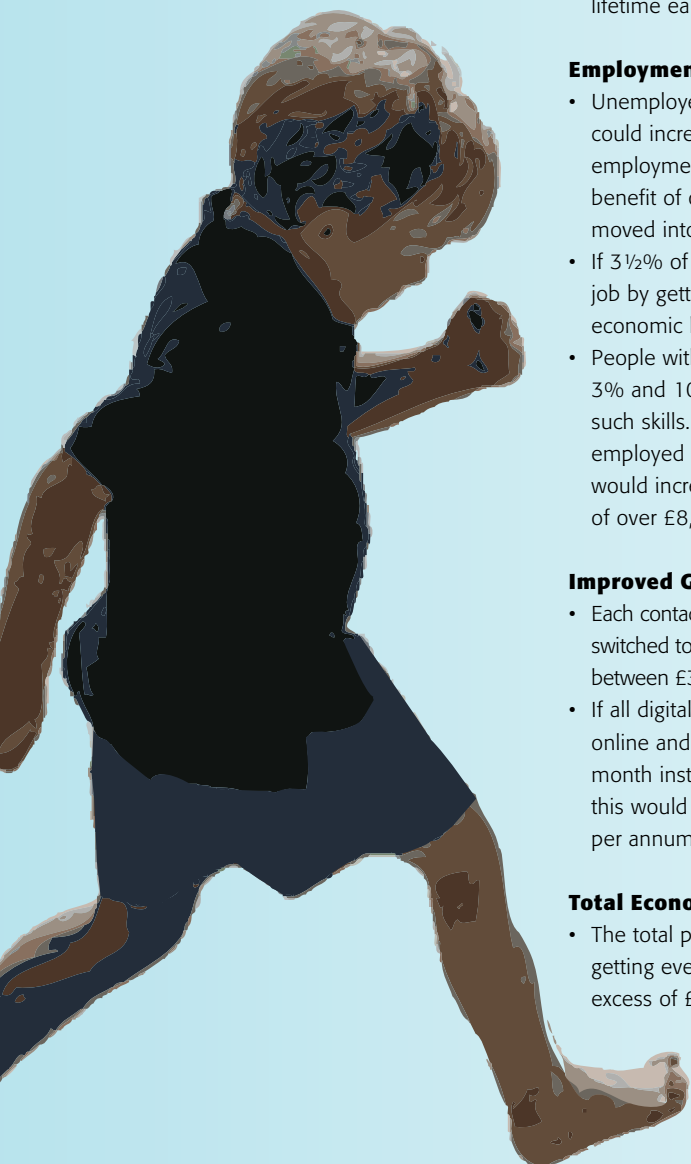
- 47% of those living in households earning

Simon Bailey IRRV (Hons) is a Director of ISCAS: contact him on

simon@iscas.co.uk (www.iscas.co.uk)

“It challenges people and organisations to inspire, encourage and support as many people as possible to get online by the end of the Olympic year.”

- less than £11.5k do not use the internet, compared to only 4% of those with an annual income of over £30k
- 48% of disabled people are offline
 - Urban areas of Scotland, South Wales and the north of England have the highest concentrations of working-age people who are offline
 - Rural and coastal areas have the highest concentrations of older residents who don't use the internet.



So why do we want people to be digitally included? Well, it's not only good for them, but it's also good for the country. In a time of austerity anything that contributes to the national wealth must be a good thing.

A report by Price Waterhouse Coopers in 2009 highlighted the benefits for digital inclusion as:

Consumer benefits

- Households that are offline are missing out on savings of £560 per year from shopping and paying bills online.

Education benefits

- Home access to a computer and the internet can improve children's educational performance. If the 1.6 million children who live in families which do not use the internet got online at home, it could boost their total lifetime earnings by over £10 billion.

Employment benefits

- Unemployed people who get online could increase their chances of getting employment, with an estimated lifetime benefit of over £12,000 for every person moved into employment
- If 3½% of the digitally excluded found a job by getting online, it would deliver a net economic benefit of £560 million
- People with good ICT skills earn between 3% and 10% more than people without such skills. If the currently digitally excluded employed people got online, each of them would increase their earnings by an average of over £8,300 in their lifetime.

Improved Government Efficiency

- Each contact and transaction with government switched to online could generate savings of between £3.30 and £12.00
- If all digitally excluded adults got themselves online and made just one digital contact each month instead of using another channel, this would save an estimated £900 million per annum.

Total Economic Benefits

- The total potential economic benefit from getting everyone in the UK online is in excess of £22 billion. To put that amount in perspective it would easily cover the £15 billion worth of welfare benefit cuts announced recently.

So if the government has no funds to boost internet usage, what is being done?

The answer is a technology manifesto issued by Race Online 2012, launched by Martha Lane Fox in July of this year. It challenges people and organisations in every sector and in every corner of our country to work together to inspire, encourage and support as many people as possible to get online by the end of the Olympic year. It works on a

basis of cooperation from what it simply calls 'partners'. Partners are organisations that have pledged to help Race Online, and they range from local authorities to small businesses – there are over 600 at present.

It is the ambition of Race Online 2012, that by the end of this Parliament:

- everyone of working age should be online, and
 - no-one should retire without web skills.
- Interestingly the manifesto has some significant recommendations for the government and local authorities. These include some drastic recommendations which appear to force the use of the internet upon those who are most likely to be digitally excluded:
- Local authorities should encourage all parents of school-age children to get online. Local authorities should signal that they expect all school admissions and free school meals applications to be submitted online by 2011
 - The DWP should introduce an expectation that people of working age should apply for benefits online, and have the skills to look for and apply for work online
 - Race Online 2012 partners should support work by DWP to ensure that no-one enters retirement unable to use the internet
 - All government departments and agencies should follow DWP's lead in identifying the key information and services that they should expect working-age adults to pursue online.

“can a government run the country where ten million of its citizens are digitally disadvantaged?”

If the recommendations from the Race Online manifesto are taken on board by government and local authorities, we should start to see a shift to almost forcing all people to transact on line, but importantly only after they have received the support and guidance necessary.

Are we moving towards a utopia where one day we will see all benefit claims completed electronically? Be aware that other countries such as France and Finland have made the right to internet access a basic human right enshrined in law. Whilst this country is not going down that route at the moment, I believe it will be only a matter of time before the lack of internet access will become a violation of a person's human rights here.