

## Carnegie UK Trust event – 5 June 2013

I'd like you to imagine 10 million of something. Anything at all – just conjure up an image of 10 million of something.

It's not easy is it? But that hard to imagine number – 10.8 million in fact - is according to Go ON UK the number of UK adults who do not use the internet.

So, almost four years after publication of the final *Digital Britain* report a vast number of people remain at risk of missing out – and they could easily become deprived, disempowered, disadvantaged and excluded. Indeed, Go ON UK has noted that: “the UK is struggling to exploit the broader benefits of the internet as digital skills become increasingly vital tools to access education, information, jobs, consumer savings and social contacts”.

The Communications Consumer Panel's role is to help protect and promote people's interests in the communications sector, and to encourage stakeholders to see issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens and small businesses. And looking through those eyes, we have long seen digital participation as crucial.

In 2010 we developed a *Consumer Framework*, which became a key element of the *National Plan for Digital Participation*. The Framework sets out what people themselves say they need to help them get on-line and maximise their use of the internet. It gives no order of priority, as different people will need different things at different times. But as the National Plan noted, the Framework gives a useful starting point to help identify where help and support might be most needed. This can then be mapped against what's already being provided and thus help identify areas of unmet need, which in turn can help shape and prioritise future action.

Our Framework outlined five key elements for people to get on-line and get the most from doing so:

- to get interested and know the benefits;
- to get on-line, by having the right information and equipment available;
- to make it work for them, by being able to use it and being able to access help and support when needed
- to realise and enjoy the benefits; and
- to manage the risks

So - back to our 10 million souls who still don't use the internet. And, by the way, it's estimated that in total about 16 million adults in the UK don't have basic online skills.

We wanted to better understand this so last year we undertook a major piece of research, the outcome of which was our report – “Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement”. This explored the issues with professional stakeholders and a sample of people who only used the internet to a small degree, or not at all themselves.

The biggest barriers to going on-line were inertia and fear.

**The ‘gravitational’ hold of the offline world** was so great that people in our sample were simply very comfortable doing what they’d always done and could see no benefits from being online. Their offline world felt familiar, safe, accessible, user friendly, quick and easy.

**And a fear of technology and its perceived complexity** put people off taking the first steps to going on-line. And many of those interviewed just didn’t relate to the images or the language that goes with technology. In other words, they were anxious about the whole thing.

A host of other barriers came up – often interconnected - and most often relating to things that were lacking: confidence; ongoing support; affordability and priority. Add into the mix social isolation and low awareness or misconceptions about community-based sources of help – and the barriers can, to many people, seem insurmountable or just not worth the money and the effort.

But what about those for whom the barriers were not insurmountable? We looked at what motivated people to give it a try and stick with it?

In brief, we found personal characteristics such as tenacity and determination played a big part, as did access to timely informal support – the availability of which was often a tipping point between giving up or carrying on. And fear came up again - but this time it was a fear of being left behind that drove people on, as did peer pressure. Finally, an understanding of the benefits of being on-line and a relevance to personal interests encouraged people to overcome the barriers.

Before I finish, let me ask you to use your imaginations once more. Imagine how different your lives would be if you were not on-line. No quick access to information; no searching for that job; no on-line learning; no quick e-mail communication; no social networking, no cheap deals off the internet; no easy booking for events; and all this in the context of heading towards a “digital by default” society. Like that number of 10 million, it’s a life that’s difficult to imagine isn’t it.

So – let me conclude. Unless fundamental action is taken, the digital divide risks becoming a digital gulf as the distance increases between those who are online and those who remain firmly anchored in the offline world. For consumers, for citizens, for the economy, for democracy and for society this is far from ideal - but it need not be that way. Progress is being made but more needs to be done, and our report made several recommendations – copies of which are by the door for you to take with you if you wish. But in short:

- We recommend digital engagement and usage being on an equal footing with broadband roll out and speed in respect of policy and funding.
- We recommend the development of clear and meaningful targets and measures – and we're delighted that following our recommendation Go ON UK has adopted a measure of basic skills.
- We recommend a greater focus on the benefits, ease and simplicity of being on-line, so that people are encouraged to make the investment of going and staying on-line; along with this is a need for suppliers to develop more low price and low risk products; and for more user friendly websites.
- And we recommend a co-ordinated tactical approach for a wide range of agencies delivering support, or with the potential to deliver support.

Thanks for the opportunity to speak to you today, and the Panel is very pleased that the Carnegie UK Trust has worked with us and built on our research within their own work. Thank you for that, and thank you for your time today.