SeAMK/SAMK TUTKIMUSFOORUMI 2022

Enhancing participation and inclusion through digital literacy: A focus on digitally challenged immigrants

Ali Tavakoli, MSc, Project researcher, RoboAI Health, SAMK

Nasibeh Hedayati, PhD, Project worker, Sininauhasäätiö

Ryann Deloso, RN, Master in Welfare Technology, Project researcher, RoboAI Health, SAMK

Jenni Huhtasalo, D. Soc. Sc., Project manager, RoboAI Health, SAMK

Tiina Mäkitalo, MSc, Head of research, RoboAI Health, SAMK

1 INTRODUCTION

Participation in the digital world requires digital literacy. Studies indicate that there is a need for stronger inclusion strategies, broad-based collaboration, and making digital solutions available to everyone (Knobel & Lankshear 2008.) Although digitalization has been beneficial for inclusion and accessibility, it has also created risks of exclusion for those with low thresholds. These individuals are more likely to be excluded and discriminated against due to their insufficient digital literacy, among other factors (Cauchie et al., 2022.) More than half of the population in Finland is digitally literate and uses a variety of online services independently (Hyppönen et al., 2018.) However, a number of groups in Finland are digitally disadvantaged, including immigrants, elderly citizens, persons with disabilities, homeless people and prisoners (Rantanen et al., 2021; Kyytsönen et al. 2020; Bank Account Obstacles Creating Finland's "Second Class Citizens," 2022.) Besides the lack of proficiency in the Finnish language, lack of digital literacy makes immigrants more vulnerable and makes it difficult for them to integrate into Finnish society. Research proves that education and training in digital skills can have an effective role in improving inclusion and participation (Cauchie et al., 2022.) This paper is a pilot study to find out what is the idea of immigrants' social service experts about the lack of digital literacy of their clients and how this affects different life aspects of digitally challenged immigrants. Further, they were asked if they suggest any solution. Based on the results of this pilot study we are planning to collect more data and design digital literacy training workshops.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital literacy is a skill of understanding and utilizing information from a variety of digital sources. It encompasses four skills: Internet search, hypertext navigation, knowledge assembly, and content evaluation (Gilster,1997; 2006.) Digital tools and facilities should be used appropriately to enable constructive social action and reflect upon the process.(Martin & Grudziecki 2006; Knobel & Lankshear 2008.) Digital Literacy has been considered essential for long life learning and for a better empowered citizen (Whitworth, 2016; Houlihan et al., 2017; Law et al., 2018)

In light of the increasing reliance on technology in the world, digital inclusion is becoming more and more important. Digital inclusion is a concept that refers to users being able to access the Internet through an electronic device that enables them to exchange information with the digital community and plays a significant role in promoting digital social equity. All types of electronic devices can be used to facilitate digital inclusion, including smartphones, tablets, computers, and Internet-enabled devices. Therefore, in this digital era, digitally challenged individuals are at greater risk of missing out on opportunities that are only available online (Hilding-Hamann et al., 2009, Anttila & Hämäläinen, 2021)

Among those digitally challenged groups there are immigrants, elderly citizens, children, and people with disabilities. Immigrants, particularly, those with low levels of education, face unique challenges. For example, there are two types of challenges facing the illiterate immigrant population in their host countries: understanding the language of the host country and being able to access different social services (Cauchie et al., 2022.)

It is important to mention that a person's skills, the ability to access the internet and technology, motivation, self-confidence, and language skills contribute to digital inclusion. In accordance with studies dealing with digital inclusion, it is necessary to strengthen inclusion strategies, develop broad-based collaborations, and make digital solutions more accessible to all. As an example, it is stated that there are difficulties in accessing services requiring digital skills, such as those related to digital health care (European Cooperation Solutions to Promote Digital Inclusion and Increase the Resilience of Society, 2021.)

Finland is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world (Finland, the world's most technologically advanced country - UN report," 2001) and has been in top of the list in EU for several years (Finland Ranks First in EU Digital Comparison, 2022.) Even though this has made life easier for majority of its citizens, it has created challenges for specific groups of citizens (Kyytsönen et al., 2020). According to a project survey, 57 percent of the Finnish population used different digital services independently and possessed some level of digital literacy depending on where in Finland one lives (Hyppönen et al., 2018.) In addition, Anttila and Hämäläinen (2021) argue that though there are a lot of immigrants in Finland who are highly advanced in their digital skills, there are undoubtedly groups of immigrants who are digitally challenged and many of whom are women. Aside from gender, poor reading and writing skills, poor language skills, low education level, poverty, lack of

support from relatives and friends, and psychological load can be contributing factors for immigrants to be in the vulnerable side on this issue.

Integration plan for immigrants in Finland is the responsibility of Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. During the integration period, which is three years, the person can participate in integration training and can receive guidance from social services. They can study Finnish and participate in trainings to get the skills for future jobs. However, there is no specific training that focuses specifically to enhance digital literacy of those who need it (Integration Plan - Suomi.fi, 2021).

3 DATA AND METHODS

The participants of the study were experts who work in organizations that provide support for immigrants. These organizations provide low threshold support for people with immigrant backgrounds, including housing advice, job searching and work life support, as well as training and education. During June to November 2022, six people in the capital area and three people in Satakunta region were interviewed. The aim of the interview and the projects were explained to all of them. The data was collected via semi-structured interviews via phone calls, in person and online meetings.

Experts were asked if they have noticed digital literacy as a challenge in their clients. They were asked if this lack of digital literacy have had any effect on the clients' life. As a follow-up question, they were also asked if they suggest any solution, and what would be the right way to solve this issue from their point of view. The data gathered from the interviews were categorized based on our three questions in to three main themes. This will be explained in findings.

4 FINDINGS

According to the interviewees, digital illiteracy is an existing issue for some immigrants, and it causes some challenges in their inclusion. In addition, their suggested solutions are discussed.

Digital illiteracy is an issue: All participants certified that they have a group of clients who lack digital literacy. They all believe that this has been a challenge in their work and organization as it is important for them and their organizations to provide the right support during immigrants' integration and inclusion process. One expert mentioned that Finland is highly digital; for a wide range of services including Kela, migri, Maisa and even housing applications clients need to log in via their online banking. Otherwise, they have to go to offices directly to be able to handle their matter. Not everyone is familiar with online banking and why it is important to use it. Further, they have a group of clients that have never been to school and have never had any digital devices, especially the elderly people. According

to them this challenge, beside language skills and especially those who do not speak English, has made using digital devices and platforms even more difficult. Another challenge for clients is when they want to communicate with different services including social workers via email. There are groups of clients that are not able to reply to emails or attach a file. These experts have also noticed that their clients are not aware of data protection and security of applications, for example; clients will use different social applications to send personal information or a picture of their ID card. Further, the even bigger challenge is that there is no clear support system in this regard for the clients. They go to school to learn Finnish language, but they do not learn about the digital world of Finland. One of the experts said, it seems that there is this presumption that everyone is aware of these digital services, and everyone knows how to use them.

Digital illiteracy makes life challenging: Due to a lack of these skills and knowledge, life is very challenging for this group of clients according to these experts. This results in social exclusion of them and somehow left out to handle their matter alone. In some cases, the problem becomes even more complicated because the client has not been able, for example, to reply to an email. Each expert based on the service they provide had some examples of these challenges. One mentioned that the client easily loses a house offer because he or she cannot reply to the emails coming from landlords. Another expert mentioned that if the client cannot fill in a form online, he or she should book a time to go to the office and do the paper version, so it takes more time for them to handle their matter. One of the experts discussed it from mental health point of view, she said immigration process and learning a new language can be mentally burdening but these digital services and lack of proper skills to use them can make it even more frustrating. Not to mention, many of these immigrants suffer from psychological traumas from their home countries making the whole situation worse. It is important to have a proper support system to include everyone, according to this expert.

Solutions: The experts who were interviewed suggested some solutions. First, education and training. They believed that there should be a support system in immigrants' integration plan to teach digital skills and how to use digital services. One of them even mentioned that in their organization they have been trying to make short videos, for example about how to reply to an email. But they think this is not enough. In addition, training and education in clients' mother tongue can be even more effective. The second solution suggested was that there is a need for more support points and centers. There are some support points in different cities in capital area where clients can go and take care of their matter but getting the service in their mother tongue is not always available. They all believed that the education and support service should be offered in different languages so people can get the right service in their mother tongue and understand the system well.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Even though digitalization aims to promote inclusion at its heart, suitable level of literacy is needed to make digital services accessible to everyone. There are digitally challenged

groups in the society including immigrants. It is essential for immigrants to become digitally literate for them to carry out certain computerized administrative processes necessary to integrate into society, support their families, and manage their daily activities. A lack of digital skills restricts their ability to develop social and personal skills that will assist them in becoming autonomous and independent citizens of their host country.

Digital illiteracy leads to digital exclusion, which results in lost opportunities. Individuals who need the most help, will be most adversely affected if these resources are not provided with job applications, social and financial services. The social service experts for immigrants have discussed that immigrants who are deemed to be digitally challenged are at risk of unintentional yet severe consequences in digital services (communication, security and commercial.) According to them most of these issues can be prevented by knowing the principles of digital services. Consequently, digital literacy is a vital component of low threshold immigrant's socio-professional integration.

It was shown that basic digital literacy workshops for digitally challenged immigrants demonstrated promising results (Cauchie et al. 2022.) Training individuals in digital literacy can make them capable of using digital tools to their advantage, as well as making them feel more confident, more responsible, able to think critically, happier, and have a wider outlook on the world. As for the next steps in this project, we will organize some workshops on the basics of digital literacy to combat digital illiteracy. This will be done through our two projects: TEKOS project seeks to improve inclusion via smart clothing and furniture and Hyvinvointia Hybridisti project aims to improve hybrid and remote health care and social services. In a separate publication, the data and results will be presented.

6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is a pilot study, and a limited number of experts were interviewed. Further follow-up study is needed to have a better view of the issue.

REFERENCES

Anttila, J., & Hämäläinen, M. (2021). Accessibility, inclusion and participation – Digital inclusion and non-discrimination as the goals of the Culture and Leisure Division of the City of Helsinki. Demos Helsinki.

Bank account obstacles creating Finland's "second class citizens." (2022, August 24). News. https://yle.fi/news/3-12590858

Cauchie, D., Bruyninckx, M., & Balfroid, C. (2022). CItizen empowerment of immigrant women in belgium through digital literacy. Edulearn Proceedings. https://doi.org/10.21125/edulearn.2022.1587

European Cooperation Solutions to Promote Digital Inclusion and Increase the Resilience of Society. (2021, October 26). HIMSS. https://www.himss.org/resources/european-cooperation-solutions-promote-digital-inclusion-and-increase-resilience-society

Finland ranks first in EU digital comparison. (2022). Valtioneuvosto. https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/10623/finland-ranks-first-in-eu-digital-comparison

Finland, the world's most technologically advanced country - UN report. (2001, August 17). CORDIS | European Commission. https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/17266-finland-the-worlds-most-technologically-advanced-country-un-report

Gilster, P. (1997). Digital literacy (p. 1). New York: Wiley Computer Pub.

Gilster, P. (2006). Digital fusion: defining the intersection of content and communications. Digital literacies for learning. London: Facet Publishing, 42-50.

Hilding-Hamann, K. E., Nielsen, M. M., & Pedersen, K. (2009). Supporting Digital Literacy: Public Policies and Stakeholders' Initatives, Topic Report 1. Final Report. Danish Technological Institute, Centre for Policy and Business Analysis, February, available at http://ec.europa. eu/information_society/eeurope/i2010/docs/benchmarking/dl_topic_report_1. Pdf.

Houlihan, M., Wiley, C. W., & Click, A. B. (2017). International students and information literacy: a systematic review. Reference Services Review.

Hyppönen, H., Pentala-Nikulainen, O., & Aalto, A.-M. (2017). Sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon sähköinen asiointi 2017: Kansalaisten kokemukset ja tarpeet. Julkari.fi. https://doi.org/978-952-343-103-4

Integration plan - Suomi.fi. (2021). Suomi.fi. https://www.suomi.fi/services/integration-plan-te-office/63170062-159b-4668-8046-80ba188e4dc7

Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2008). Digital literacy and participation in online social networking spaces. Digital literacies: Concepts, policies and practices, 11, 249-278.

Kyytsönen, M., Aalto, A.-M., & Vehko, T. (2020). Sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon sähköinen asiointi 2020-2021: Väestön kokemukset. Julkari.fi. https://doi.org/978-952-343-680-0

Law, N., Woo, D., & Wong, G. (2018). A global framework of reference on digital literacy skills for indicator 4.4. 2 (No. 51, p. 146). UNESCO.

Martin, A., & Grudziecki, J. (2006). DigEuLit: Concepts and tools for digital literacy development. Innovation in teaching and learning in information and computer sciences, 5(4), 249-267.

Rantanen, T., Järveläinen, E., & Leppälahti, T. (2021). Prisoners as users of digital health care and social welfare services: A Finnish attitude survey. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18(11), 5528.

Whitworth, A. (2016). Information literacy and information practice. The SAGE handbook of e-learning research, 315-335.