

You can't write a CV on a smartphone – digital literacy is no help to unemployed youth

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Credit: George Milton from Pexels

Concerns have been raised for some time about the UK government's "digital by default" approach to welfare reforms. More and more public

services are being shifted online and many fear that this will marginalise people who are not computer literate.

But our research demonstrates that even the so-called digital generation – young people who seem to spend half their life online – are struggling just as much. They may be incredibly digitally literate in terms of [social media](#), [photo sharing](#) and [instant messaging](#); they may be highly discerning about the apps they use, but their digital culture is no help when they try to find a job.

It is becoming clear that more and more people are being affected by welfare reforms. In a survey conducted by [Advice Leeds](#) in 2013, for example, 68% of respondents said the reforms had affected their ability to meet living costs or pay bills; 50% said their ability to pay for food was affected, and 44% said fuel costs had been affected.

For our research, we spent time in Leeds with young NEETS – the term used to refer to people who are not in education, employment or training. We were involved in two ethnographic projects with community arts organisations and young people on benefits, and we have been interviewing charities and public sector organisations who help them.

It became clear that for these 17 to 25-year-olds, adult life has been an experience entirely characterised by careful budgeting, little money, bridging loans and constant rationalisations around spending. Funding for projects that seek to help NEETS is also increasingly scarce and the demographics affected by unemployment are increasingly diverse. It is not the case that those on [job seekers](#) allowance are the perpetually unemployed. It is not the case that all those on job seekers allowance are content, unwilling to work or uneducated.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the digital-by-default philosophy

is experienced daily by young people seeking work. People looking for a job are now expected to devote up to five hours a day to the task and apply for between 10 and 15 jobs a week. If they fail to meet certain quotas, a jobseeker might have their benefits stopped. Many of the people we spoke to had seen their benefits stopped, usually for between three and six months but sometimes for up to a year.

But job searching and submitting an application are both now very much online activities. That means people who are out of work and often out of money need to somehow find a way to spend large portions of their day [online](#) if they want to break the cycle.

The young people we worked with told us that their homes don't have broadband for a variety of reasons. Some families simply can't afford it, while others don't have a credit rating and some saw arguments break out over who pays the bill when they did get connected. If tenants move around a lot, it's also difficult to keep a contract with an internet service provider.

In Leeds, libraries often only allow visitors to spend between 15 minutes and an hour using their internet services – and the same is probably true in other areas. Even under these rules, they are struggling to cope with demand.

At the same time, the smartphone is the tool most young people use when they access digital welfare services. But while smartphones are already the device of choice for so many young people, they are by no means ideal for writing a CV or applying for a job. Aside from basic formatting issues, these activities require a very different kind of literacy.

The young people were incredibly digitally literate when it came to tariffs and consumer rights. They knew exactly which tariff was best at

any particular time across service providers, for example. But their credit for making actual phone calls often fluctuated or was non-existent. This made it difficult to keep in touch with social or youth workers and especially to have sustained conversations with them.

It is clear from working with these young people that even while smartphones are compulsively taken in and out of pockets, checked, and engaged with, they are inadequate devices for what is required by the welfare system.

Young people appear to have a vast knowledge of digital technologies and in some cases far outstrips that of adults. But this knowledge and literacy does not empower them when faced with a job search or application, a court order or email exchange with a social or youth worker. These [young people](#) are, clearly, digital by default, but their digital literacy is also – like the phones they use – often smashed or broken.

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