Business, government can span tech divide for people with disabilities

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Forging public and private partnerships that encourage broadband access for people with disabilities may help bridge a technological divide that hinders them from reaching their potential, according to an international team of researchers.

Besides connecting people who have disabilities with resources that may help them become more independent, equipping them with broadband technology can also benefit society and ease the financial burden on taxpayers, said Krishna Jayakar, associate professor of communications, Penn State.

"The benefits of bridging this gap are many and helping people become more independent is just one," Jayakar said. "What is not obvious are the social benefits to the community and the benefits to taxpayers." Jayakar and colleagues examined national policies on broadband Internet access in five developed and developing countries, including the United States, Australia, South Korea, China and India.

In the United States, only 54 percent of the 16 million households where someone has a disability have a computer, compared to about 80 percent of non-disabled households. Only 43.1 percent of households that include a person with a disability have broadband access, while 72 percent of non-disabled households are subscribed to broadband services.

"The principal reason for non-subscription is that households remain unconvinced about the benefits of broadband, though cost and lack of suitable equipment are also important," the researchers said.

Building nationwide programs to connect people who have disabilities with broadband equipment should be looked at as an investment, since it can save money by helping to ease the strain on social infrastructure, according to Jayakar, who worked

with Gary Madden, professor of economics, Curtin University; Chun Liu, associate professor of economics and management, Southwest Jiaotong University; and Eun-A Park, assistant professor of communication, film and media studies, University of New Haven. Empowering people with disabilities to use the internet gives them the opportunity to monitor their own health and find information, instead of relying on social services.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 is one example of how governments can meet the needs of their citizens with disabilities, Jayakar said. However, the legislation does not include provisions for broadband access.

The researchers, who report their findings at the annual convention of the Pacific Telecommunications Council today (Jan. 22), said government programs that mandate broadband access for people with disabilities are only one option and might not necessarily be the preferred option. They found that the most successful programs tended to unite public and private sources.

"One possibility is a public-private or purely commercial partnership where governments can work with businesses," said Jayakar. According to the researchers, introducing new customers to broadband technology can help expand markets for businesses.

"There is a marketing advantage in adding accessibility features to products in the mainstream market, which can make them more attractive to the general consumer, even as they help people with disabilities, which can help them more fully participate as both citizens and consumers," Jayakar said. While businesses can play a role, governments usually have the resources to coordinate a range of grassroots efforts that are spread across the country.

"South Korea, for example, organizes community programs aimed at increasing technology literacy for older people," said Jayakar. "The country has been very effective at coordinating this digital literacy program on a national level."

The program offers lessons to older citizens to learn how to operate computers and troubleshoot problems. For example, the instructors teach the participants what to do if their computers crash and how to protect their machines from computer viruses and other forms of malware.

While local libraries and other community groups host the computer literacy courses, the government helps to coordinate the effort across the country.

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