

The new world of work and the need for digital empowerment

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References are often made to forced migrants' digital literacy, including their use of smartphones to organise journeys and communicate once at their destinations. Other digital skills, however, including those relating to the workplace, are of greater relevance to supporting their integration.

The digital divide broadly speaking refers to gaps created in society based on access to and use of technology.¹ It is typically described as a twofold concept: a divide based on access to technology and a divide based on skills and usage. In most developed economies, the divide based on access is diminishing as a result of general growth in internet access. In the European Union, for example, household access to the internet is around 85%. However, scholars argue that the skills and usage divide is much more pertinent than the access gap.

Digital skills are broken down into five types: operational (being able to operate a computer), mobile (being able to use a mobile device), information navigation (being able to find and interpret relevant information), social (sharing information and curating friendships) and creative (creating online content).²

Although traditionally the use of technology is associated with operational skills, successful participation in society depends much more on information



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navigation skills, social skills and creative skills. For example, being able to find the most appropriate financial services increasingly depends on one's ability to formulate the proper queries and filter and sort through online information. Those arriving in destination countries, who might bring well-developed operational skills, and devices, may well lack the more crucial digital skills for societal inclusion.

Generally, digital skills are increasingly correlated with people's level of education (instead of, for example, with age and gender), suggesting that the digital divide will persist. In practice this means that substantial sections of the population lack the skills to successfully use the internet, despite having access to it. Forced migrants who enter the country with low socio-economic status – and therefore a low level of digital skills – can therefore end up in a vicious circle of poor digital skills and exclusion.

With the workplace evolving quickly, having digital skills becomes ever more integral to every industry. Furthermore, as the workplace is evolving, so are requirements for workers to stay up-to-date with relevant technological developments. As education is also increasingly technology-driven, workers are increasingly required to use technologies in order to update themselves. Users also require increasingly developed digital skills in order to benefit from many digital service offerings and services tie-ins

from private parties – relating for example to housing, communication services and legal services. Such digital skills required by citizens in order to participate in such societies are also required by forced migrants.

Refugees are by definition greater risk-takers and more mobile than residents, which can make them more adaptable to these labour market changes. However, those arriving in the country of destination need to be able to make their skills visible, get them recognised and avoid ending up in a digital version of the less-skilled-low-pay equilibrium that affects many developed and emerging economies alike.

Beyond pushing buttons

It may well be that the provision of humanitarian assistance to forced migrants and the regulation of the protection system will continue to be digitalised. In addition to such digital assistance, however, forced migrants need digital empowerment. Digital tools can improve forced migrants' lives, while changing labour markets are creating opportunities for motivated and skilled individuals to embed themselves in their new societies. Digital skills, however, go beyond pushing buttons and knowing how to operate a mobile device; in particular, the crucial skills required to find, understand and utilise online information are often neglected. Lower-skilled forced migrants, or those whose long journeys have had a negative impact on their access to further education, are in danger of falling by the wayside. Inclusion programmes for migrants should therefore consider focusing on digital skills training at all levels.

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