Podcast: The Role of Tech in Resettlement—Digital Inclusion Ep. 2

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Introduction

Krysti Nellermoe: Welcome to the Switchboard Podcast. Switchboard is a comprehensive resource hub for refugee service providers in the United States, funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. We offer resources, training, communities of practice, and programmatic assistance to programs funded by ORR and those serving ORR-eligible populations. I'm Krysti Nellermoe, your host. Today, we'll explore the topic of digital inclusion, focusing on how service providers can help new arrivals develop digital literacy skills. Our guest today is Leana Mayzlina.

Leana Mayzlina: My name is Leana Mayzlina. I am the Senior Program Manager for the Digital Equity Accelerator at Aspen Digital, which is part of the Aspen Institute. I've been involved in digital inclusion work for about 15 years, in various capacities, both internationally and nationally in the U.S., most recently supporting a program called the Digital Equity Accelerator to help scale organizations already working on digital equity issues.

KN: Wonderful, very exciting work.

Could you describe for us the definition of digital inclusion?

LM: That's a challenging question because there are multiple definitions from different organizations. From a very U.S.-based perspective, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance defines digital inclusion as the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). This includes affordable, robust broadband internet, internet-enabled devices, access to digital literacy training, quality technical support, and applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration. I also appreciate the United Nations' definition, which is short and concise, stating that digital inclusion is defined as equitable, meaningful, and safe access to use, lead, and design digital technology services and associated opportunities for everyone, everywhere.

What strategies have you seen effectively utilize these definitions in working with individuals and communities throughout your tenure in digital inclusion?

LM: I think, you know, as we're talking about, there are lots of definitions and there are lots of different ways that people interpret what digital inclusion is and what it means. And that, to me, really identifies the importance of really responsive programming and strategies that are community-based. There's no one-size-fits-all approach. Just like there can't be one definition, there can't be one program that addresses everything everyone needs and just magically resolves all the digital inequities that we have. There are a few different components or best practices that make programs really effective, or at least what I've seen in my experience.

The first one being making sure that you're being incredibly responsive to what your specific community or individuals or organization needs. So, for example, you might not want to go into a setting with older adults and teach them how to enroll themselves in preschool, right? But if you're just taking a program that's already existing and you're trying to apply it, you might end up in that kind of situation where you're applying something that's not really a great fit. So being really mindful of what the people that you're working with need, and then working with them to build something that meets those needs. I think another big piece of that is making sure that programs are equitable. So that can be anything from making sure that if you have individuals with disabilities in your class, making sure that the space is physically accessible to them, or making sure that keyboards are designed in a way that they can participate. It might mean that if you have mothers with children coming, then you just make sure to have extra chairs, right? Or childcare, or whatever it is that is needed to make that an equitable space where people can engage. I think sustainability is another big piece. That means both financial sustainability, so trying to plan programs for multiple years where possible, and then sustainability in making sure that it is sustainable. Integrated into what the organization is doing, so sort of that long-term vision of how do we make sure this is not a one-off where we get people excited and then the program goes away, but we really plan for the future. Integrated and intersectional is another piece. So back to the sustainability. The likelihood that your program is going to be sustainable, I feel like, is greatly increased when you're integrating it with other programs that might exist. And then I think, you know, in connection with that whole integrated piece, you want to make sure that you work holistically because digital inclusion is not just literacy. It's not just access. It's not just affordability. It's all these components. And if you're only working on one of them, it makes it a little bit hard to make that work because even if you teach someone digital literacy skills, but they go home and they can't afford the internet, they're only going to get so far. Right?

KN: That was an incredible overview working in the resettlement space. It can be very difficult to integrate digital inclusion into other programming for a lot of reasons.

Do you have any advice for settlement agencies with limited capacity, limited resources that are wanting to kind of have this whole office approach for digital inclusion, as you were saying, that it's integrated into all aspects? with those restraints, how would you advise a resettlement service provider on how they could have that whole office approach to digital inclusion?

LM: Yeah, that's a great question. I think I remember you doing this, Krysti, is that sometimes you have to sell it. I say that with air quotes. You have to sell it to other programs in your organization as this is not an extra burden. I am actually saving you time and resources. It's reframing it to, we're not asking you to do additional things, we're not building on top of all of the competing priorities, we're actually telling you that if you try to, for example, teach your participants how to access certain government benefits, but you're not teaching them how to navigate a computer, it's actually going to be harder for you to teach them that basic component, because someone else then has to step in and say, well, actually, to access all of these benefits, you first need to know how to turn on a computer, and then you need to create an email address, and then you need to know what a secure website is and all of that. So, I feel like where possible if we can get people to think about it as a way of making their job easier and more effective and more efficient, then I think it flips the switch to them seeing why it's actually a critical piece of their work that they might already be doing. That's the thing. A lot of them are already doing this and they just don't necessarily think about it as digital inclusion.

KN: We're going to move over into kind of your current work. So please describe your work on accelerating digital equity programs for organizations.

What have you gleaned as best practices from your time at the Aspen Institute or any other information you think is pertinent to this audience?

LM: Yeah, the Digital Equity Accelerator was a program that was focused on helping digital equity-focused organizations across the world scale their impact. So we had two different cohorts over the last few years. Most recently, we had a cohort that was 10 organizations in three countries. So we worked specifically with South Africa, Mexico, and Malaysia. And in those, in those countries, there was sort of a wide array of organizations.

Some of them worked on supporting teachers and learners. Some of them worked with immigrants and refugees. Other others worked primarily with individuals with disabilities, a wide array of where they focus their work. But the through line for all of them was this digital equity component. The other big through line is that they were all at a bit of an inflection point. So these were organizations that were. very much existing, functioning organizations. These were not startups, but they were really wanting to take their work to the next level. They were ready to amplify and expand their impact. And they didn't necessarily have the resources or the know-how of how to do that. This was a partnership between Aspen and HP, there was an investment of $100,000 that each organization received, as well as $100,000 of hardware, technology, and then In my humble opinion, the most important component was the capacity-building piece. So moving on to the best practices part of your question, I think there were quite a few best practices that we took away. One was that. I think all of the organizations that were the most successful had a very unique value proposition, and they knew what it was. In one community, they were working with women who were incarcerated in Mexico, and they were the only organization essentially working on digital skills in jails with women. Like, very, very clear mission, very clear value proposition. There were other organizations that were working with marginalized communities in Malaysia to try to get youth more educated. There was an organization in South Africa that worked with specifically youth and primarily black youth who could not find employment. So very specific value propositions. They knew exactly what they were trying to achieve. That was, that was one thing that I think really made some of the most successful organizations stand out. I think another aspect that, that was really successful was these organizations understood that to be relevant, they needed to always be evolving to be responsive to their communities. And they needed to have really adaptive leaders, leaders who were not stuck in. Well, we're going to do it this way because we've always done it this way, right? If you're going to scale your organization, you need to be willing to say, hey, actually, that didn't work. We're going to change how we do things. We're going to own that we didn't do this properly. We're going to be accountable to the community that we tried this thing, we piloted it, it didn't work, we're going to evolve, we're going to move on, we're going to be responsive, and we're going to try something else. So I think that kind of both ability to be adaptive and also humility in the leadership was really critical. And then this goes back to the, to the previous conversation about sustainability. All of the organizations that I think have been the most successful are the ones where they understand that digital inclusion is very much part of their mission.

KN: I had the privilege of working closely with you, Lianna, in the Digital Inclusion Fellowship in 2018 with N10. And for those of you who don't know, N10 is a nonprofit that supports nonprofits in equitable use of technology.

Could you describe for us the N10 Digital Inclusion Fellowship?

LM: Yeah, N10 launched this program about nine years ago at this point and the goal of the program is to support nonprofit leaders across the U. S. In either building brand new or expanding existing digital inclusion programs that can look in lots of different ways. There are no limitations to what kind of organizations participate. We had libraries, we had housing authorities, we had resettlement agencies some government institutions, community organizations, etc., participate. And then, through that one-year-long program, our fellows sort of built their skills they, they participated in lots of training opportunities, and then also they implemented projects to start expanding or start a new digital inclusion program for their community.

KN: You have worked with eight cohorts of fellows. You have probably experienced a lot of their barriers and issues and learning from them and have a great pool of knowledge for how to address some of these challenges that many service providers or folks in the field run into with digital inclusion.

Could you speak to some of those barriers and how you see resources or the best ways to approach some of those challenges with solutions might be?

LM: Yeah, great question. I think there were some that were really. A pattern throughout all eight cohorts of the fellowship, all kinds of different organizations that really stood out to me. So one of them was, especially in the early years, programs that used the term digital inclusion got pretty much no participation. No one knew what a digital inclusion program was and marketing materials that said, come to our digital inclusion open house. That was an empty room, right? No one knew what they were showing up for, so I think that was a big pitfall. The

solution to that is very simple. It's just a reframing of, we're doing a how-to design spreadsheets course for free. Come check it out. That is much clearer than we're having a digital inclusion open house. Or, we are teaching you how to create a safe password. Come join us. I think another pattern that I noticed was that, The organizations and the fellows that seem to struggle the most were ones where they didn't necessarily have buy-in from their leadership team. And a big piece of that was sort of education and managing up because like we talked about earlier, once people were able to sell their leadership on the idea of digital inclusion on why it's relevant, why it's important, even if it's not already part of their mission, then they often did get the buy-in and they were able to move things along much more smoothly. And I think, last but not least, and I think this is maybe the most controversial challenge, that really took some, some push and pull with fellows when, when they were onboarded is that I think we, we make a lot of assumptions about what is valid and what is not valid in terms of digital inclusion. You know, sometimes you hear people complaining about, hey, we set up a computer lab and the kids are coming to watch YouTube. That's not okay, right? Or, we set up a computer lab and these older folks are coming to read the newspapers, but that's not what they should be doing. They should be learning how to do spreadsheets. And that's really not the right way, in my opinion, to do digital inclusion. There's, there's no, Right or wrong way of doing digital inclusion. If watching YouTube is relevant for someone and it is why they want digital inclusion, it is not the place of an organization to say that is not the right use of technology. We will tell you what the right use is. And, Oftentimes, that means that technology needs to be used for something, in quotes, productive and not for entertainment, for joy, for fun, etc. But the reality is most of us do use technology to watch movies, to scroll Instagram, to do all these things that are entertaining. So why would we set different barriers and standards for someone else?

KN: Yeah, I resonated with many of the barriers and challenges that you had mentioned and I was trying to, put myself back into the situation when I was thinking how I navigated those barriers or, or helped either lead up or create partnerships. And I think, the barrier that I kept coming up against with digital inclusion was the integration and of digital inclusion programming across the board. initial resettlement services there with just the limitations of when services have to happen with ensured durations of time, the capacity having to do education on, what digital inclusion is and, and how it could be integrated to support all the services offered to new arrivals.

Do you have any suggestions for service providers to overcome these barriers and challenges or resources you would recommend?

LM: I think some of the best solutions for addressing a few of the barriers we talked about is to really simplify and think about it from your community's perspective. I think we are used to sort of living in this ivory tower of all of these terms and definitions and all of that, and that can be a little overwhelming and confusing. So sometimes, just taking it back down to this is a computer class. This is a basic skills class, and just articulating in that way can be really helpful. Also, just letting go of some expectations around what Successful or valid digital inclusion looks like it is okay. If people want to use their devices for YouTube, it is okay. If they want to use a laptop to read a newspaper, and in terms of resources, it's a little challenging to answer that question because I think there are nowadays so many resources that it's, it's hard to say which ones are going to be most helpful for whom. I honestly think that the biggest resource for anyone is to talk to other people. I'm a big believer in peer learning and connecting with others who are doing the work. There are certainly organizations. There's the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. There's the Global Digital Inclusion Partnership. There's N10, of course. A lot of these organizations have some really great reports, information, guides. NDIA has a startup guide that I think is really helpful. But ultimately, I think the best resource for anyone doing this work is to connect with other people. N10 has an online community where, where people can connect with other digital inclusion practitioners. I'm also always happy to be a resource if anyone wants to connect with me and just You know, be that, be that network creator and refer folks out.

How have you seen digital inclusion relate to other critical needs and issues faced by displaced populations and resettlement in the U. S.?

LM: I feel like we're going to get sick of hearing the word integration, but I feel like digital inclusion really is or needs to be integrated into pretty much every need and service. Some that come to mind immediately are government services, and nowadays it is incredibly hard to connect with any federal, state, etc. government

services without being online or without having an email address or A password or any of that. So that's, that's a huge Need, I think, in terms of digital inclusion, anything having to do with workforce, so upskilling having a job and having technical skills for a job, but also even if your job is not anything that requires computer skills, just like with government services, there are very few jobs that you can apply for with a paper application. Nowadays, you have to go online. Education is another one, enrolling your kids in school or participating in school or college online. All of that requires a connection. And then last but not least, I think this is another place where, you know, it's very easy to think about the productive pieces of digital inclusion, but it's also incredibly important to think about the softer pieces and the nonproductive pieces, and things like cultural connection are incredibly important. There was a fellow that I remember working with early on in the digital inclusion fellowship, whose project really focused on working with older immigrants, individuals, for the most part, over 70 years old, who primarily wanted to have internet access so they could read the newspaper if they wanted to, in Chinese. That was their big wish—they wanted to feel connected to China. They wanted to be able to know what was going on in their hometowns. They wanted to be able to email their friends that were still in China. So that cultural connection piece is not productive. It doesn't have to do with getting services or a job or education, but it is incredibly important in terms of mental health, in terms of emotional health, and in terms of just feeling connected to your community.

KN: It was super helpful to think through all the different categories that digital inclusion touches and affects in a person's life and how it can really connect somebody back to their home and back to their culture and can also help them integrate into a new space. Thank you for that overview.

What are some success stories around digital inclusion that you carry with you as your motivation or kind of those guiding lights?

LM: I think some of the biggest success stories are the kinds of success stories that we don't often talk about. I've seen a lot of numbers around, you know, this many individuals gained digital skills so that they could get a job, right? Incredibly important. Or this many individuals were able to participate in virtual classrooms so that they could earn a degree. All of those are super important but I think the stories that stand out the most for me are the not very traditional stories. One of those being the one I just shared about having these older immigrants connect with their hometowns and being able to read their newspaper, I think one of them came from a town of about 400 people, like, out in the middle of nowhere, and they were able to find their hometown newspaper, and it was just, like, you could see their face light up with the excitement of being able to connect to something that felt lost to them. There was another fellow who worked, I don't remember, Christy, if this was in your cohort or not, but she created an online dating class for seniors. And again, you know, I think there's, there are bells going off for people of like, that's not the right use of digital inclusion, but really it is. It is if that is what people need. And so these older adults really wanted to date. They weren't sure how to do that. They knew that there were apps, but they didn't know how to navigate the apps safely. And so she created an online dating class to help these folks connect, and she got some great stories about people meeting the loves of their life later on in life because they were able to participate in this class.

KN: Those stories are so humanizing, and it's incredible to think how digital inclusion creates spaces of connection.

Leanna, where do you see digital inclusion in the next five to ten years? Read the future for us.

LM: Yeah, I'm scared of reading the future because I feel like that's a losing proposition. And I don't know how to predict what will happen, but I will say what I want to happen, despite the fact that in the definitions of digital inclusion that we talked about earlier, most of the definitions do mention the word create or be a part of, I feel like that is a place where the digital inclusion sector is still really lacking. I think most programs nowadays are really focused on having access and having skills. And I think while both of those are incredibly important, those are baseline. That is the minimum that we need to make sure that people have, but the skills shouldn't just be about how to navigate these systems or how to get what you need off of the internet. It should really be about how to create, how to make sure that the internet is as diverse and as open and as rich as the world we live in because so much of what we see online is really from a Western perspective, it is mostly in English. It's

still pretty limited in terms of having a really rich diverse array of creators. So what I would like to see happen, and I don't know if this will happen, I don't know how to tell the future, but I would really love for digital inclusion programs to shift a little bit and think about how do we make sure that people can create content and be a part of something that is more than just transactional.

KN: Leana, thank you for your response. I completely agree. And if we aren't creating agency for digital inclusion, what's the point? It's for folks to be able to navigate, create, connect. Not just apply for jobs, here's my last question for you.

Can you share your thoughts, advice, or key takeaways for service providers developing digital inclusion programs for refugee or other ORR eligible populations?

LM: I think agency should really be at the center of so much of this conversation. It's, you know, it goes back to the earlier conversation around Who gets to decide what is digital inclusion and how we use our devices. . It is all about giving folks the tools and the resources so they can decide what they want to do and how they want to navigate and what they want to create. I think also something that is. Top of mind for me these days, especially. In the U. S. is that with COVID, I think it's, it's amazing that digital inclusion has really been highlighted. This is work that many people in the sector have been doing for decades. And it took COVID to really make it a priority for so many other institutions and also, I think we really need to think about it in two pieces, one of which, this is a very hot topic right now, so we should take advantage of it, we should push it as far as we can, we should get people on board while it's a hot topic, because it won't always be a hot topic, and at the same time, especially in the U. S., and I think this is true for a few other countries right now as well , there are so many resources currently that It feels like there's a bit of a money grab happening. There are, there's an influx of money from the government, there's an influx of money from philanthropy, from private funders, and so everyone is trying to jump on board, which on the one hand is great, because I think it will further digital inclusion work. Where I worry is that, that can also create a really fragmented ecosystem, where people who haven't been doing this work before, see money, they jump for it. And there's not necessarily sustainability built into that. And I think that's, that's where we really need to think strategically about how we want to make sure that this work is not just, you know, the, the happening thing right now or the exciting hot topic, but that it's really sustainable and it's really integrated into everything else we're doing.

KN: Lianna, thank you so much. This is an incredible opportunity to speak with you and learn so much from your years of experience in the digital inclusion space. Thank you for highlighting how important it is to resettlement services and for that agency we discussed how new arrivals can gain access to their futures through digital inclusion.

LM: Yeah. And thank you so much, Kristi, for, for inviting me to have this conversation. I'm always excited to talk about digital inclusion I'm a huge admirer of all the work that you've done and will continue to do to make digital inclusion a part of resettlement work all across the country.

KN: Thank you for joining Switchboard today. If you're a resettlement service provider and looking for ways to improve your current program or build new programs, please don't hesitate to reach out to the Switchboard team via our website, switchboardta.org. Please check out our resource library for the latest resources on refugee resettlement. Thanks for tuning in and see you next time on the Switchboard podcast.