

Feeling connected: qualitative analysis of social and digital inclusion experienced by Digital Champion Volunteers at Newcastle City Libraries

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Introduction

Digital literacy is a vital skill for citizens in a modern society, and lack of such literacy risks exclusion for those people on the fringes of society experiencing social and economic disadvantage (Department for Digital Culture Media and Sport, 2017). Almost 15% of people in the UK are unable to use the Internet, with a further 15% having limited use, with almost all non-users classified as disadvantaged (Good Things Foundation and Yates, 2017). Public libraries play an important role in providing access and training through digital literacy sessions, often supported by Digital Champion volunteers.

These volunteers also benefit from their involvement with enhanced social belonging, refined skills and experience, and the chance to return to paid employment (Casselden et al., 2017). Volunteers are an unstable resource, yet are increasingly relied on following moves to austerity (Casselden et al., 2017). Therefore, it is useful to investigate how the role of volunteering benefits feelings of belonging and social inclusion, thereby creating the 'hooks' that ensure a reliable and high quality value-added volunteering effort.

This paper will consider Newcastle Central Library's (NCL) Digital Champion volunteers; what motivates them to volunteer, and their underlying feelings of belonging. The background to NCL's Digital Champion volunteering effort will be considered, followed by discussion of the chosen research method. Findings relating to the key enablers of the Digital champion volunteer experience will be identified, focussing on individual, employment, environmental and people related factors, together with discussion of key challenges, and associated implications for practice.

Background

The recruitment of 40 Digital Champions by Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) and Newcastle City Council (NCC) was originally part of an initiative to support the roll out of WIFI in sheltered accommodation, designated tower blocks, and supported living accommodation in the city. The Digital Champion volunteers received training in basic digital skills, with an expectation that they would then cascade knowledge gained to their local communities. However, despite valiant efforts, there was low take-up from residents. Therefore, the focus of the volunteer changed from one of cascading digital knowledge within their local community, to one of supporting learning initiatives delivered to community groups, and more recently digital literacy sessions based at NCL. Of the 40 original Digital Champion volunteers, 5 remain, and the number of volunteers has grown to a small but active group of 15 individuals who provide support for the Digital Inclusion Officer (DIO) in the delivery of one-to-one supported digital literacy classes (Online basics), and drop-in sessions (Techy Tea Parties) at Newcastle Central Library.

Seven of the Digital Champion volunteers were interviewed, and were encouraged to tell their own stories of volunteering, thereby providing a context for their motivations for volunteering, and enabling subsequent reflection on experiences in order to understand perceptions of social and digital inclusion. Key question areas covered included:

- Their motivations for becoming a Digital Champion volunteer initially.

- What they felt were the benefits of being a Digital Champion volunteer.
- How being a Digital Champion volunteer made them feel, and affected their sense of belonging.
- What kept them volunteering in their role.
- The challenges that existed for them in their volunteering role.

Interviews with professional staff helped to provide a service perspective, and user survey data obtained from the digital literacy sessions enhanced the triangulation of the results.

Data was analysed using NVIVO software, which provided a rich picture of emergent themes, and resulted in a better understanding of the profiles of the digital champion volunteers.

Research findings

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The dominant stemmed words that arose from the volunteer interviews related to *people, liking, knowing, helping and working*. Sentiment was very positive, and there existed a clear set of enablers that facilitated successful volunteering.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Key topics that emerged from detailed analysis of these areas comprise 4 key overarching themes, which will be considered in detail in the next section.

- Individual factors: such as altruism, passion, feelings of self-worth, and enjoyment.
- Employment factors: such as job satisfaction, skills development, and the possibility of gaining paid work.
- Environmental factors: Such as culture, boundaries, relationships, tea, and cake.
- People factors: such as social belonging, feeling part of a family, and the people in charge.

Individual factors

Individual factors, such as altruism, passion and self-worth, often provided the initial spark for people starting their volunteering, in addition to serving as the 'glue' that enhanced longevity of the volunteering effort. A better understanding of these factors helps to improve initial recruitment and management of volunteers in the short and long term.

Altruism

Altruism was a strong theme running through the experiences of many of the volunteers interviewed, and mirrored many of the discussions outlined by Brodie et al. (2009) . There was a desire to help others, to do good deeds, with understanding that sections of society were less well off in terms of their digital literacy and economic status. Therefore, doing something that was meaningful and of altruistic value was an important motivating factor for the Digital Champions. Making a difference was a recurring theme,

"It gives you a buzz, because you know that you are passing on your knowledge onto people who haven't actually been quite so lucky. They haven't had the opportunities that I have had, and things like that".

Informal volunteering occurred as a matter of course, helping friends and family with a variety of tasks such as shopping, flat sitting, and IT related help. Formal volunteering also took place involving a variety of third sector organisations.

Digital Champions displayed a clear compassion for others, and were well aware of the barriers that existed for those digitally excluded, and the resulting challenges. For some volunteers volunteering was part of their identity; some had ideological overtones, others displayed 'religious' reasons, suggesting it was their duty to undertake such a role. It was certainly a motivating factor for many and underpinned why they initially chose to volunteer, and continued volunteering.

"I like helping other people, I always have done".

The importance of being responsible for someone was also a key factor here, and provided a means by which volunteers could care and assist people who were less fortunate than they were.

"I like the feeling of people not having to feel that they are alone, and there are actually people about them who actually care about them, and are willing for no financial gain whatsoever, to actually help people".

Passion

The volunteers exhibited passion, commitment and responsibility, and it was evident that these factors were something that they were immensely proud of, and provided a motivational aspect to their working in a voluntary capacity. The importance of participation being rooted in communities of interest is really important when considering the context of volunteering (Brodie et al., 2009: p.40).

"To get up early in the morning, to be here at 10 in the morning, means that we love what we do".

In addition, Digital Champions exhibited a genuine interest in technology and sharing their knowledge. They enjoyed the challenge of matching their knowledge to the skills of each workshop learner, and working with people who wanted to learn.

"That's the best, when you join up the dots, and it takes away the fear. They kind of realise that they actually are part of the digital world, and they just haven't realised it".

Self-worth

It was apparent that many of the Digital Champions had fallen by the wayside in terms of their academic or working career, and undertaking the role of a volunteer enabled them to gain additional confidence and skills, thereby improving feelings of self-worth, and providing a "source of personal identity" (Baines and Hardill, 2008: p.313). In a world where we often define ourselves by our paid employment, it is important to consider the positive role volunteering has to play in building identities for those who are not engaged with the traditional working world.

"It makes us feel good".

The Digital Inclusion Officer suggested,

"Many of the volunteers to begin with hadn't worked as part of a team and many of them had quite low self-esteem. A few of them I would also have classed as somewhat isolated in their existence. Since they have taken up their volunteering roles their confidence level and their personalities have greatly developed".

Enjoyment

Enjoyment was crucial for Digital Champions, and a key motivating factor, enabling them to sustain their volunteering efforts. The combination of altruism, doing something they were passionate about, and improving self-worth helped to boost enjoyment considerably. These feelings of enjoyment fostered a level of commitment and loyalty that was very important for the success of the Digital Champion role.

"I enjoy it, that's probably the main thing".

Vecina and Fernando (2013: p.875) suggest that "helping is more beneficial if it is motivated by pleasure", and likely to be of greater quality. Ensuring volunteer skills match their role is also important (Casselden, 2016: p.172).

Employment factors

Many of the volunteers cited their initial motivations for volunteering stemming from wanting 'something to do' that was meaningful and enjoyable, and filling a void, whether that be because of unemployment, retirement, redundancy, ill health, educational failure, or simply not needing to work. It also enhanced feelings of self-worth and being a valuable part of society as mentioned earlier.

"Right now, I just sort of treat it like a sort of job in a way".

"Well I felt like I had to do something, I felt like every day I was sitting around doing nothing".

"I mean obviously being long term unemployed, it's a lot of sitting around being bored out of my skull, so it's just nice to be able to actually do something, to have something constructive to do with my time".

Job satisfaction

The Digital Champion role involved autonomy, working one-to-one with learners in workshops, and involved knowledge sharing, and making a difference. Indeed, many volunteers discussed what they did as though it was a paid job (similar to findings by Baines and Hardill (2008: p.315)), displaying a level of commitment and responsibility that one may not think possible without remuneration.

"So as long as you are enjoying it, and volunteering is something you want to do, it's probably near enough to getting job satisfaction".

Skills development

The Digital Champions felt their volunteering role enhanced their communication skills, in addition to growing confidence. They experienced opportunities to communicate with a varied cross-section of people, providing a challenging yet rewarding aspect to their volunteering role. Also, teaching and IT skills were refined through having to teach others.

"It has helped me explain things better to people in general".

"I think it enhanced the tailoring of the message to the recipient".

The Digital Inclusion Officer commented on advanced understanding of learner needs displayed by the volunteers, in addition to the positive feedback that came from the workshop attendees. The enhancement of human capital through the acquisition of additional knowledge, skills and competences aligns with the investment model of volunteering (Souto-Otero and Shields, 2016). Indeed, Vecina and Fernando (2013: p.875) suggest that “helping is more beneficial if it is motivated by pleasure”.

Gaining paid work

For some Digital Champions experiencing long term unemployment volunteering acted as a stepping stone back to future paid work, and this potential was identified by Baines and Hardill (2008: p.315). It helped to boost their confidence, and provided a breathing space in which to re-consider career options and enhance CVs in a safe, supportive and meaningful environment.

Such volunteering was a means to an end, with volunteers in a transition phase.

“To stand any chance of getting back into employment. The most important part for me is to just try to keep doing some sort of voluntary work”.

Environmental factors

Working environment is crucial to enhancing the longevity of the volunteering effort. If people do not feel respected and included, they may feel they do not belong and lack loyalty. Clear boundaries help ensure clarity and manage expectations. Digital Champions were very positive about their volunteering environment, having been recruited, trained and fully supported throughout. Indeed, the importance of the Digital Inclusion Officer in organising and facilitating the volunteering effort was key to the continued success of this initiative.

“With a previous voluntary job, they weren’t helpful, they weren’t supportive in the role, and I didn’t know what was expected of me. But here I know exactly what is expected of me, I can get on with it myself, not constantly being looked over. So, it’s a nice working environment, it’s not in any way hostile”.

“I’ve been in places where it has been completely the opposite, and that’s one of the reasons why I keep doing it, because I may not feel like I belong, but I certainly don’t feel like I am excluded”.

Culture, boundaries and relationships

When questioned about the digital champion volunteers, the Digital Development Manager of the Library Service suggested that targeted management and close communication with the Digital Inclusion Officer were important success factors.

*“They receive a lot more support in terms of training and guidance and the paid staff member’s hard work, enthusiasm and management of the group have ensured that they buy in to what they are doing, are proud of the work they do and are well trained and supported. The importance of **** (Digital Inclusion Officer) and her skills cannot be overstated”.*

The participative way in which the DIO built volunteer relationships through the active involvement of volunteers when planning and preparing workshops, ensured mutual respect. The importance of negotiating boundaries when delivering public services in partnership with volunteers is challenging, but valuable when considering service quality (Clarence and Gabriel, 2014).

Tea and cake

Building a team approach, through the use of the library café, rewarding volunteers with refreshment, in addition to planning and discussing issues that arose was a particularly successful part of volunteer management, engagement and reward.

People factors

Many of the Digital Champions discussed the inclusive environment, enhanced by the personality of the DIO. They felt part of a team, and felt appreciated. They mentioned being part of one big happy family, and exhibited a strong loyalty to their fellow volunteers, the workshop attendees and the Digital Inclusion Officer. This social element was clearly a very important part of maintaining interest and the longevity of the volunteering effort, and helped to enhance feelings of job satisfaction.

Social belonging and feeling part of a family

Volunteering helped Digital Champions feel connected with wider society, in addition to interacting with others. Some of the volunteers were unemployed, with health conditions that restricted their ability to get paid employment, whilst others lacked the necessary skills and experience to compete in the jobs market. Several of the Digital Champions mentioned the importance of feeling part of the local community. One recently retired volunteer expressed the benefits of his activity in terms of being “a bit more plugged into the local community”, something he felt had been lacking whilst he had been working.

“I used to drive to work, so I didn’t have to mix with people on public transport; I mixed with similar people at work, so it’s been a bit of an eye opener seeing how the majority of the population live”.

For one volunteer who was unemployed their volunteering provided a means by which they could engage with the outside world.

“Partly I said to myself I want to get out a bit more, and I was a bit sick of being in the house”.

Some volunteers discussed the benefits of working closely with the public in workshops, expressing the positive outcomes of meeting people from a variety of backgrounds, who they would not necessarily meet within their own social circles. Indeed, meeting and better understanding the workshop attendees was important for the volunteers and part of the reason why they enjoyed their volunteering. Some learnt new things from the workshop attendees, whilst others learnt more about themselves having worked with the workshop attendees.

“Yes and even the learners have told me things”.

An important factor was also the building of a team between the volunteers themselves, and the friendships that had resulted, enhanced by the fact that they were a small group of 15 people meeting every week. Face-to-face communication, mutual training, social tea breaks, and an enthusiastic organiser who oversaw recruitment and allocation to workshops all helped build the experience. The environment was one of acceptance, friendship, and mutual support.

“I have a good relationship with the volunteers here, everyone’s very friendly. Seeing the same people every week, you can catch up a bit for a few minutes before hand and after”.

It was evident that the role of belonging in maintaining loyalty (Casselden et al., 2017: p.9) was something that required careful attention. The recruitment of appropriate volunteers was crucial,

and this was something that the DIO raised in order to get a “glimpse of their personality”, such that the mix of personalities worked well for the overall team. In addition, the role of training, and providing opportunities to enable social connections to grow and develop were crucial.

Challenges

Such enablers are clearly, of value to any volunteering effort, however challenges exist that limit opportunity for wider application. These relate to the profile of the volunteers, the size of the volunteering effort, the availability of paid staff, and the requirement for wider communication with the local community to ensure future uptake of volunteer run sessions, in addition to further supply of willing volunteers.

Longevity and fragility of volunteering effort

As mentioned earlier many Digital Champions started volunteering due to unemployment and were in a state of transition.

“I suppose getting money from somewhere at some point, the sooner I do that, the better, I think I will start to search properly”.

Therefore the stability of the volunteering effort was in a state of flux, and required active management to avoid uncertainty. Discussion with the Digital Inclusion Officer identified that such worries had in part been addressed through the development of partnerships with a local bank willing to provide staff to volunteer, however she also acknowledged the importance of networking.

“I never say no to anyone who applies because I realise that circumstances for my current volunteers could change at any time”.

Small is beautiful?

One of the reasons for the success of the Digital Champion volunteers was because it was small scale, enabling close working relationships, and a targeted management style assigning volunteer roles dependent on individual personality traits. However, it is questionable whether this style of management would work so well with increased volunteer numbers.

Communication with the wider community

It was acknowledged that getting the message across regarding the benefits of volunteering was challenging, and created challenges for future recruitment of volunteers.

“Community communication is very important but for some reason it is quite hard for me to get the message out there about what we do here at the library.....I do some promotion by Facebook and Twitter, but my messages need to be communicated more widely to those who are not online and don't know how to access these platforms”.

Staff dependency

Success of this Digital Champion scheme was relied on the efforts of one staff member. This individual had a committed approach to working with volunteers that involved respect and communication, such that the volunteers valued her presence and reciprocated her hard efforts by demonstrating similar traits. Strong bonds had developed through joint development and delivery of digital literacy sessions, and volunteers were fiercely loyal to their manager.

*“What **** does is brilliant, she’s super enthusiastic, and the work that she does, and how she helps people, it’s just great”.*

Locke et al (2003, cited in Brodie et al., 2009: p.32) considered the importance of, ‘strategies to ensure volunteers are managed in an explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciative way’, thereby ensuring loyalty and a sense of belonging for volunteers.

However, staff dependency can challenge the delicate equilibrium of volunteer relationships, in addition growing the volunteer group could challenge the relationships that currently exist within the group.

Conclusion and implications for practice

The Digital Champion volunteers, although small in number, were an important part of the public library service, adding extra value and a tailored service.

Digital Champion volunteers were more varied in their demographic composition, and less typical of traditional public library volunteers. This was probably due to the recruitment of volunteers from the Your Homes Newcastle initiative, in addition to requiring a technical specialism, rather than a love of reading or local history. The volunteers had altruistic tendencies, but also exhibited traits that identified that their volunteering might provide them with a stopgap, whereby they could consider their route to paid employment, or future career plans. It enabled them to define themselves. In addition, the volunteers were more visible than traditional library volunteers were.

The social and digital inclusion that resulted from this type of activity was a multi-level phenomenon. The Digital Champions felt part of a team, but also part of the local community, in addition to enhancing their digital and social skills. Their volunteering also contributed to the social and digital inclusion of the public attending the digital literacy sessions.

Several drivers enhanced belonging for Digital Champions:

- They were doing something that they cared about, whether that be altruistic motives such as helping others, or because they enjoyed technology.
- They were carefully recruited, with the oversight of a paid member of staff, and undertook work that was appropriate to their ability.
- They were encouraged to train, and were involved in decision-making and course development. This gave them a sense of ownership, and trust.
- They felt valued, knowledgeable and worthy. Many viewed the role as a job in itself.
- As such, they felt loyal to the members of the Digital Champion team, their workshop attendees and the paid member of staff who delivered the sessions.
- The small number of Digital Champions helped to facilitate close bonds between the volunteers, and the paid member of staff.
- The paid staff member was an important influence on the success of this volunteering venture. In addition basing the classes in the public library provided a neutral accepting environment.

Intrinsic rewards were important. Digital Champions wanted to help people less fortunate and make a difference, share their own technical knowledge, belong to a group, and refine skills related to communication and confidence. Therefore, they enjoyed what they did and felt happy, doing something they felt was meaningful. They felt the environment they were in was inclusive,

participative, and provided them with an opportunity to 'work', building their feelings of self-worth and refining their skills.

Motivational areas included:

- Individual beliefs
- Employment aspects
- Working environment
- People

There are indeed challenges to this type of volunteering, particularly that many of the people are in transition, and may not choose to volunteer when faced with the option of paid work. This case study was a small-scale activity, which may not have worked so well on a larger scale, and involved intensive paid staff time, again less feasible on a larger scale. The role of the paid member of staff in ensuring longevity was vital, and this was expressed by both volunteers and library managers, who felt that the close friendship and support that the DIO had built up with the volunteers, created a successful and nurturing volunteering environment. In addition, the need to develop communication and partnership efforts to ensure continued supplies of willing and able volunteers is crucial, alongside the continued development of existing volunteers.

Therefore, the implications for practice are that intrinsic reward for volunteers, together with sustained teambuilding, and shared ownership are important parts of a high quality, reliable volunteering effort within public services.

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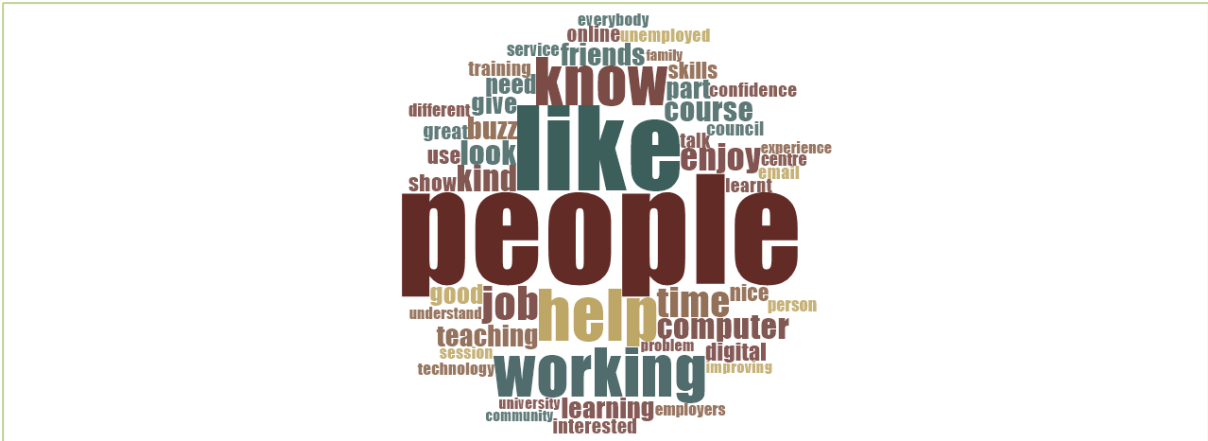


Figure 1. Word cloud of 50 most common stemmed words from interviews

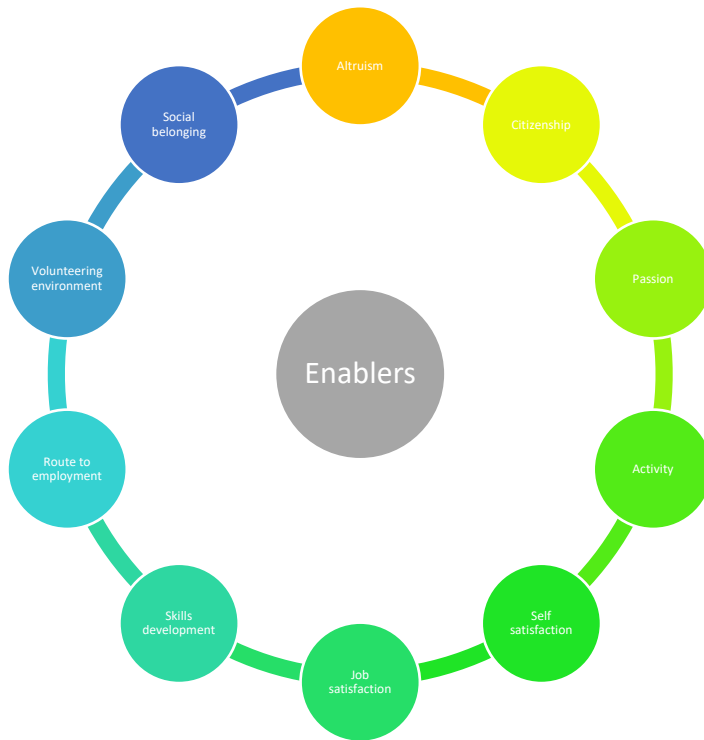


Figure 2. Enablers in the digital champion volunteering experience