▶ Public Employment Services pressing ahead with digitalization should be aware of the digital divide

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The internet is becoming a key resource for job seekers, entrepreneurs or those looking to make a career change. To ensure they remain inclusive, PES should be aware of the barriers limiting access to clients with low digital literacy and pinpoint solutions for making services easy to access, safe and as intuitive as possible.

Job searching is going digital but connectivity gaps persist

Digitalization is global and influences every aspect of people's lives. Job searching and recruitment methods are also evolving and going digital. The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the role of technology and the way in which public employment services (PES) facilitate participation in the labour market, whether in salaried jobs, self-employment or a combination of both.

Today, 50 per cent of the world's population uses the internet for multiple purposes, including job searching (UN 2020). However, there are still wide disparities in broadband access across regions and groups of the population. The majority of people with limited access to digital technologies live and work in developing countries. Many are women, persons with disabilities, older workers, and low-income young people in Sub-Saharan Africa, South-East Asia and the Pacific region (ITUC-UNESCO 2019).

Digital inequalities have prevented many people from shifting to remote working and receiving skills training since the start of the lockdown owing to the pandemic. Access to government support for returning to work, remaining in education or accessing training can be facilitated by new technologies. PES can play a crucial role in enhancing basic digital skills for jobseekers, or those wishing to change career or start an apprenticeship or internship.

PES digitalization accelerated in response to the COVID-19 crisis

As part of the digital transformation taking place in the world of work, PES are embracing digital technologies to better match people to jobs. This is occurring, however, with varying degrees of development and investment. According to the International Labour Organization, PES in 69 countries across all regions have capacity to provide basic services online, such as information on open vacancies and registration of clients for job-matching. One third of PES in these countries are already offering AI-driven solutions to jobseekers and employers (ILO 2020).

Even in developing countries where digital networks are poorly developed, mobile connectivity is already the main gateway to the web and job vacancies available online. Most PES moved their intermediation services and labour market programmes online or provided them by telephone to increase support and ensure delivery (ILO 2020b), following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this trend is likely to continue beyond the crisis.

Technology is a tool for inclusion but disparities persist

The digital transformation of PES can increase equal access to opportunities to work for all. Placement and recruiting technologies can also benefit employers by saving time and reducing costs, particularly in a context of an economic recovery. Digital technology has been a powerful tool for

expanding coverage of employment services, particularly in low- and middle-income economies. It is also contributing to optimizing the internal operations of employment services.

In addition, digitalization represents an opportunity for PES to automate certain administrative tasks and minimize time that counsellors spend in responding to routine questions from clients. In this regard, technology can be considered a time saver, allowing for staff to focus on clients who need enhanced and personalized support to overcome complex barriers to employment. When applied properly, technology opens up new possibilities for the inclusion of groups facing barriers in accessing the labour market and remaining in the workforce.

In 2020, PES were systematically using digital services to serve target groups (see figure 1):

▶ **Young people** are at the forefront of internet use for accessing PES, even in low-income countries.

▶ Nearly eight in ten PES proactively use digital delivery channels and other technology to reach out and involve people **with disabilities**.

▶ **Older workers (50+)**, who may experience bias in hiring, access PES remote services slightly more than women who are single parents do.

Web-based applications for delivery and over-the-phone services are helping to break traditional barriers to communication and mobility. Employment is one critical area in the delivery of public services requiring stronger digital capabilities to expand and facilitate access to government support. While technology offers new possibilities, disparities persist for some groups owing to the digital divide. In half of the surveyed PES responding to the cited ILO survey (ILO 2020b), the delivery of services through technology-based channels remains low for women as single parents, migrants, refugees, displaced workers, minorities and indigenous people.

▶ **Figure 1. Technology-enabled employment services for labour market inclusion**

Source: ILO, 2020b.

What accounts for the digital divide in job searching?

Despite the potential of digital technology to improve people's lives and their chances of finding a job or telework, the high costs of devices and a reliable internet connection prevent many, mostly women, from accessing vital government services online, including job search support. In the case of employers or businesses, these combined factors may limit their ability to find talent. While some aspects of the digital divide have narrowed over time, digital inequality related to access and low digital literacy skills persist. This creates further barriers to securing and sustaining jobs for those groups of the population already

experiencing precarious working conditions and vulnerability.

PES need to take into account all these factors when designing employment services using new technologies. Yet acquiring technology is not enough, as PES need to understand the barriers faced by different groups of jobseekers, while leveraging the potential of technology and ensuring equal access for all clients.

Below are some of the most common constraints experienced by people who are disadvantaged in the labour market:

▶ **Access to ICT and broadband networks remains unaffordable for many people**. According to the World Economic Forum (2016), 31 per cent of the global population live in countries without 3G infrastructure to support data transmission. Even in countries with superior network technology, not all jobseekers can afford access to a reliable and fast connection to the internet. The majority of low-income earners in developing countries rely heavily on pre-paid mobile phones to go online. Besides data plan fees, there are other costs associated with using the internet, including electricity to recharge the mobile phone's battery. For those who do not own a personal device to access the internet, there is also the cost of transportation to reach an access point, such as an internet café or public library. When looking for jobs, these people have to cover charges for additional services, such as scanning documents, printing or using video.

▶ **Recruitment is shifting online, including filling low-skilled jobs and entry-level positions**. People without uninterrupted access to the internet are disadvantaged in terms of applying for jobs online, particularly in sectors and industries heavily reliant on this recruitment method (for example, international chains of hypermarkets and department grocery stores). The COVID-19 pandemic has further expanded the use of online recruitment to many other sectors and industries. Yet even when jobseekers from less affluent backgrounds manage to apply for a job online, they still face the difficulty of not being easily reached by employers for video interviews and application follow-up. Moreover, it is often the case that this group of jobseekers do not own individual email accounts, have a regular mobile phone number or access to a fixed telephone line.

▶ **Searching and applying for jobs online using pre-paid mobile phones is not easy**. Low-income and disadvantaged jobseekers often own or share a pre-paid mobile phone to access the internet. Not all existing job-search platforms and resources for improving employability are optimized for mobile apps. Inefficiencies, such as long buffers and crashes, make it difficult to import data or perform multiple tasks, including creating a video résumé or streaming tutorial videos to follow online training. Moreover, online content is not always available in local languages or adapted to the local definitions of job positions. Low-skilled and first-time jobseekers also find it challenging and frustrating to fill out job applications requiring competence-related vocabulary they do not understand.

▶ **Algorithms influencing job searching and matching**. AI technology is optimizing job matching and is being used more often to recruit and hire. However, in the absence of adequate regulation or careful programming, algorithmic decision-making in recruitment also opens up the possibility for bias and discriminatory practices that work against under-represented groups or jobseekers with less ability to fill out online application forms.

▶ **Reluctance to go online**. Some segments of the population do not see a compelling reason to use the internet in general, and even less to look for work. In some instances, the underlying cause for this reluctance is cultural or generational. McKinsey estimates that non-internet users are mainly among seniors (aged 55 or older), individuals living below the poverty line, often in rural areas, and the illiterate population (2014). Women are the hardest hit by these conditions, representing 52 percent of the offline population. A combination of vulnerability and a lack of awareness about specific job-search support available to jobseekers via the internet prevents them from proactively seeking help or attempting to use web-based employment services. The current COVID-19 crisis, however, has pushed many reluctant jobseekers to seek employment services support remotely, due to prevailing restrictions still in place in many countries.

▶ **Insufficient digital skills**. The lack of basic digital skills is the main factor preventing people from successfully finding a job online. Only 40 per cent of people residing in countries covered by the ITU 2020 report on measuring digital development stated that they have the knowledge to perform basic operations online,

such as sending an email with an attachment. In addition to the basic skills that individuals need to navigate the internet, jobseekers need to know how to register for services online, filter job vacancies using a mobile app or a job-search engine, submit a job application and understand the criteria for evaluating whether an online job portal is safe.

Placing clients at the centre of PES technological transformations encourages labour market inclusion

Closing the digital gap can drastically reduce job-search costs and increase a person's chances of being hired or gaining a regular income through self-employment. Understanding the barriers that jobseekers must overcome to use web-based services can help PES identify which hurdles are highest in each segment of the job market and pinpoint solutions for making services easy to access, safe and as intuitive as possible. It is the responsibility of PES to establish services that are appropriate to the circumstances of clients who face barriers to securing a job.

Placing clients at the centre of technology transformations allows PES to better integrate new solutions into the job-search strategies of jobseekers in need of enhanced support. The digital transformation must consider the ways in which PES meet everyone's needs through better design of job-search support, whether online, face-to-face or by phone. While there is a clear trend towards service digitalization, when it comes to ensuring greater accessibility and inclusiveness, PES are using mixed approaches. During the COVID-19 crisis, face-to-face services have been maintained even in countries where PES are adopting "digital first" policies to safeguard equal access for clients with low digital literacy.

PES are finding innovative ways to extend online support to target groups

In promoting an inclusive environment, PES play an increasingly role in removing barriers to participation in the labour market, while encouraging the utilization of digital technologies and helping to prepare workers for increasing digitalization of the labour market. Yet in adapting their digital strategies, providers of PES must not only understand the local labour market conditions, but also look closely at the individual circumstances of jobseekers and offer a mix of services and delivery channels that responds to their level of needs.

Below are some examples of the innovative ways that PES from different countries are extending online support to target groups:

▶ **Bringing free internet access to targeted jobseekers**. There is a range of options to extend access to the internet to people with limited access to a reliable internet connection or through their devices to search for jobs online. Technological options range from mobile units to street booths where people can run a quick job search, contact the job call centre or even print a résumé. The PES in Mexico, for example, use mobile units to reach clients in remote rural and urban areas to facilitate participation in programmes for seasonal work on Canadian farms or provide information on available job offers and training opportunities.

▶ **Developing jobseekers' basic digital skills**. In the Philippines, people using PES offices have access to digital skills workshops, where they learn how to search and apply for vacancies online safely and prepare for video interviews with potential employers. The United Kingdom organizes one-to-one support sessions for improving the ability of older workers to connect to the internet and go online through partner community providers.

▶ **Face-to-face support by a counsellor continues to be very relevant for target groups**. In-person support in combination with other delivery channels, such as the telephone, enable PES to meet the needs of clients who do not have the resources or understand how to use web-based technology to access support remotely. During the COVID-19 lockdown, PES in Bulgaria maintained a desk-based service recognizing that the majority of their clients have no digital skills, alongside other service delivery channels. This mixed approach has proved more effective.

▶ **Using the power of social media to increase outreach**. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Colombian PES network has increased its presence in social media to broadcast alerts and updates to clients. It also encourages jobseekers and employers to visit the employment services for additional support with their job search and recruitment process.

▶ **Involving clients in the design of services online**. International practice vividly demonstrates that involving people in the design of services is a promising exercise. When jobseekers have the chance to give feedback on their experience using new

technologies, PES can ascertain the bottlenecks and make the necessary adjustments to simplify communication with them. The PES in Flanders, Belgium, is trying this approach with young people not in education, employment or training.

▶ **Facilitate access to digital jobs and training**. Low digital skills can be a serious obstacle for young people from vulnerable backgrounds, in particular, for young women. In India, the PES, in association with the Centre of Excellence for Career Counselling and Gautam Buddha University, held the first Virtual Mega Internship and Placement Drive to facilitate access for young graduates from different social and economic backgrounds to new and emerging jobs in the tech sector. The European Commission has also launched the reinforced Youth Guarantee programme to ensure young people who were hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic can gain basic IT skills to take full advantage of the digital economy.

The way forward

As the labour market starts to recover from the COVID-19 crisis, PES must seize this unique opportunity to use digital technologies to strengthen delivery with a human-centred approach that improves diversity, equity and inclusion for all.

Targeted labour market interventions and broader access to PES digital services are critical to maintain the employability and job-readiness of groups experiencing greater vulnerability and job instability. Inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches can accelerate recovery and encourage labour market participation in a digital era.

In addition to a technology-based delivery, flexibility in reorganizing operations and partnerships has substantially contributed to boosting the capacity of PES to adapt, particularly in the context of the pandemic. PES play a critical role in providing assistance to those clients who have insufficient digital skills, confidence or access to take full advantage of available job and career opportunities. This should be backed by their stronger commitment to ensure digital technology is intuitive, safe and easy to access for all clients.

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