The Digital Divide Report

Tackling the digital divide, together

Today's technology has the potential to help create a fairer, more inclusive, and prosperous UK. Applied responsibly, it can create services that respond to individual needs, improve social cohesion, and drive economic growth.

For the majority of the UK population, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly accelerated this technology adoption, underpinned by the country's IT infrastructure. But, there remains a significant minority who have not been able to equitably access the benefits that digital technology creates.

Based on a UK nationally representative sample, this report explores a complex topic and asks a key question: what steps can decision makers take to lay the foundations for future success and ensure that everyone benefits from increased digitisation?

In many cases, as with income or education, existing inequalities are exacerbated by the digital divide. In others, we observe more complex divisions in the ways people use digital services. With the rapid pace of technological change in the public sector and more widely, it is essential that we understand, confront, and overcome these divisions. Our research shows that 7 million (14%) people in the UK face some form of digital exclusion caused by limited access to digital services or the lack of skills, confidence, and motivation to make use of them.

As the UK accelerates out of crisis and into a digital future, now is the time for business, academia, government and civil society to tackle this challenge head on. Accenture has identified three key priorities for leaders to address this divide and ensure that everyone in the UK can benefit from a more digital future.

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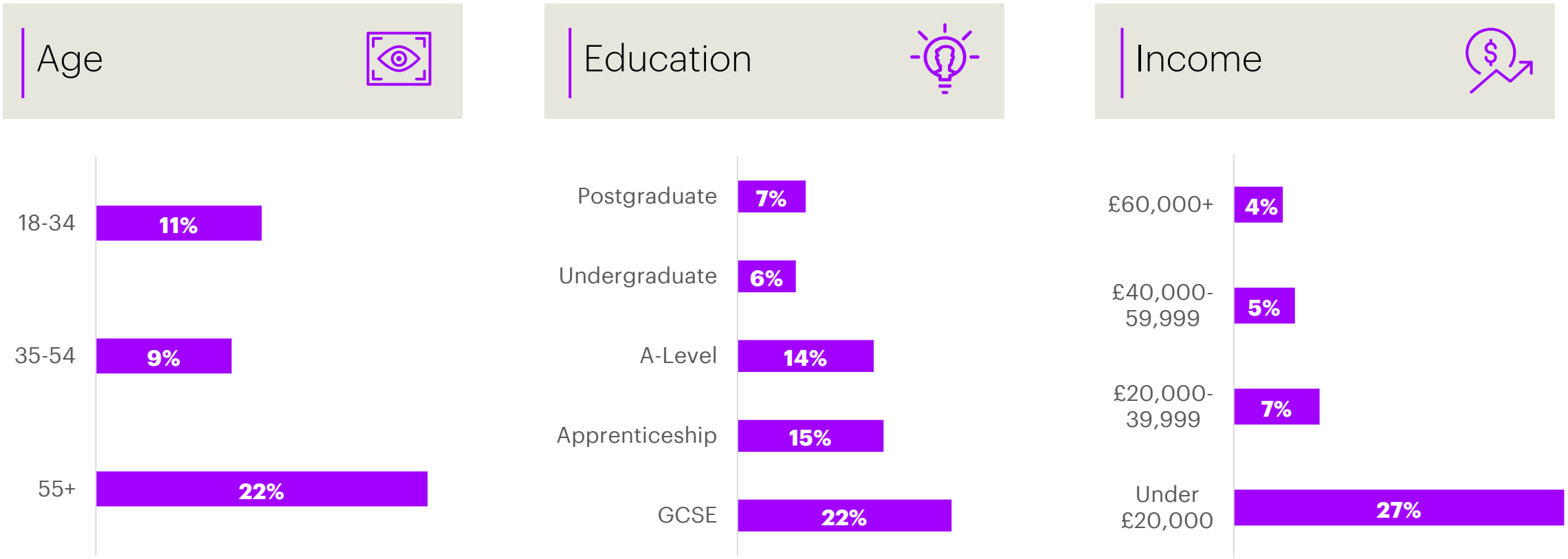
The demographics of digital exclusion

Figure 1: How likely different demographics were to report indicators of digital exclusion



Becoming digitally active

To mitigate this divide, the needs of disadvantaged groups must be addressed with targeted strategies suited to the challenges they face. Importantly, these strategies must focus on helping people make active and productive use of the internet for their personal and professional development, not just as passive consumers of media and entertainment.

To achieve this goal the two digital necessities – access and skills – must grow in tandem. If they are to reap the rewards of an increasingly digital society, individuals must be both digitally literate and confident enough to make productive use of the tools at hand.

This could have major individual advantages when it comes to accessing higher paid employment within the growing digital economy[1]. However, developing a more digitally enabled population could also help boost UK productivity for businesses and enable government to engage and serve citizens more effectively.

With that in mind, we should be cautious that 'digital first' does not mean 'digital only' – services must be accessible to all, regardless of digital ability. As people develop new digital skills and interact with services in new ways, ensuring continued and equitable access should remain a top priority, particular for public sector organisations.

Figure 2: Examples of the types of activities referred to as active (work and study) and passive (entertainment and leisure) in this report.

Active Uses	Passive Uses
Creating digital media	Browsing social media
Remote working	Streaming TV
Online learning	Playing Video Games

Everyday Digital Life

There are few, if any, areas of life that remain untouched by digital.

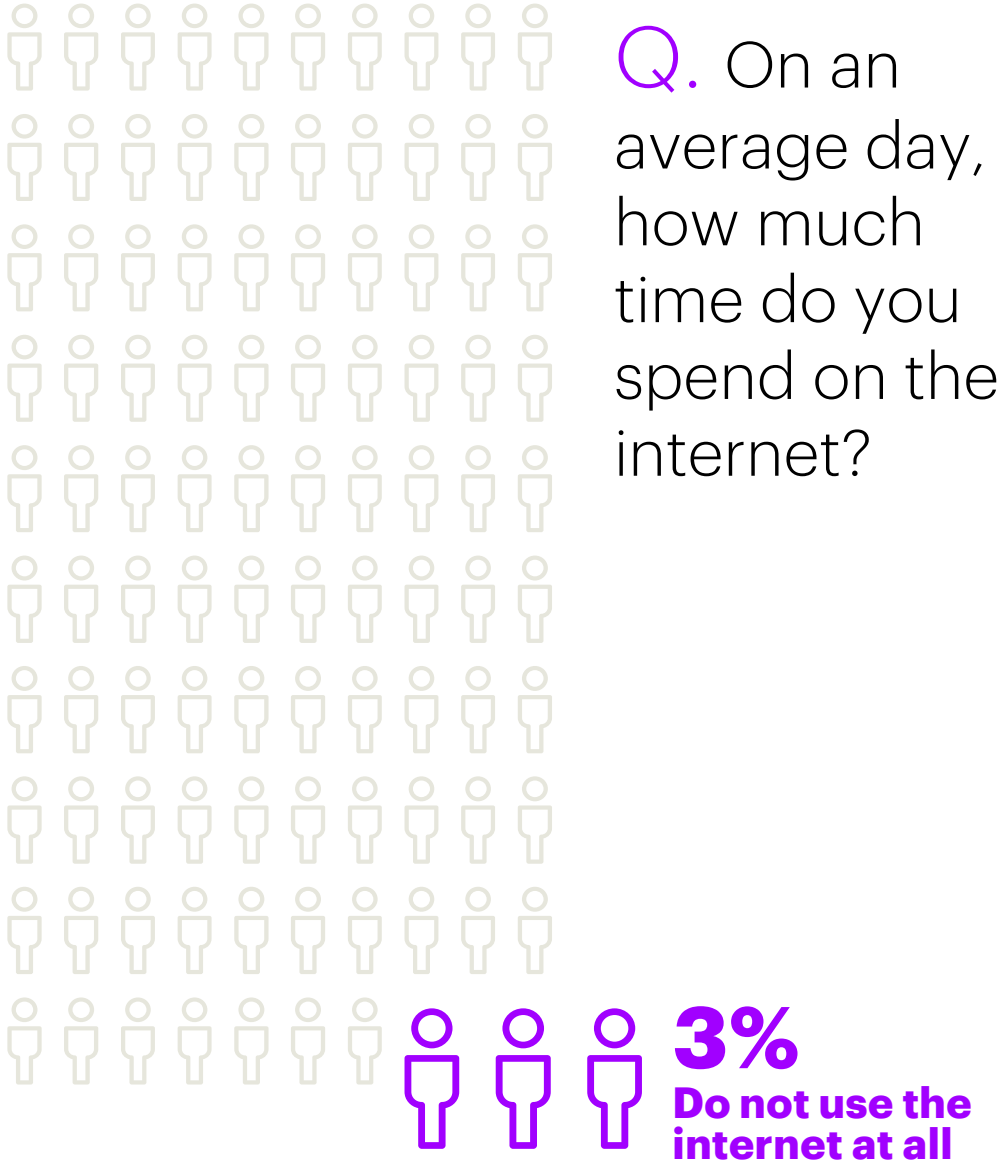
Everything we do, from shopping to renewing our passport, now has a digital dimension. This has been the case for years, but the impact of COVID-19 makes it unequivocal.

Having access to digital devices and services is no longer an optional extra, it is an integral feature of everyday life. Full participation in employment opportunities, education, entertainment and public services, increasingly hinges on digital access.

While the majority of UK citizens are able to participate in the digital world, there is a sizeable minority for whom access is more problematic. At the most acute end of the spectrum, our research shows that 3% of UK citizens say they do not use the internet at all. That would equate to around 1.65 million adults.

However, this group is only the tip of the iceberg. Many more report other, more complex forms of digital exclusion.

Figure 3: The non-internet using population.



Technology + Confidence = Inclusion

The UK's digital divide is not created solely by those who do not use the internet at all. Digital exclusion arises from a combination of the lack of access to technology and the confidence to use it.

The former includes not having access to the internet, not having a laptop or desktop computer in the household, and/or not being able to access fast broadband speeds. Together, this represents technological exclusion where people simply do not have the tools they need to make full active use of digital opportunities.

The latter arises from a lack of confidence in executing four or more of the five skills set out by the government in the Digital Skills Framework[2]. These people may have access to the tools they need to be active participants in the digital economy, but they are unable to use them fully.

When these factors are considered together, our research suggests that there are 7 million people in the UK who, in one way or another, experience digital exclusion. Worryingly, some demographics experience this more than others, particularly those from low income households, over 55s and those without a university degree. Interestingly, regional disparities do not seem to have an impact on levels of digital division. London (16%) and the South East (18%) seem to experience similar levels of digital exclusion as the North West (17%) and Yorkshire & the Humber (20%).

> “There are layers to digital inclusion. It is not only about whether people have the digital skills, but also the motivation and confidence to use those skills. Can people access the digital services they need to run their life and participate in society?“
>
> **Louise Marston**
> Director of Ventures
> Resolution Foundation

The Layers of Exclusion

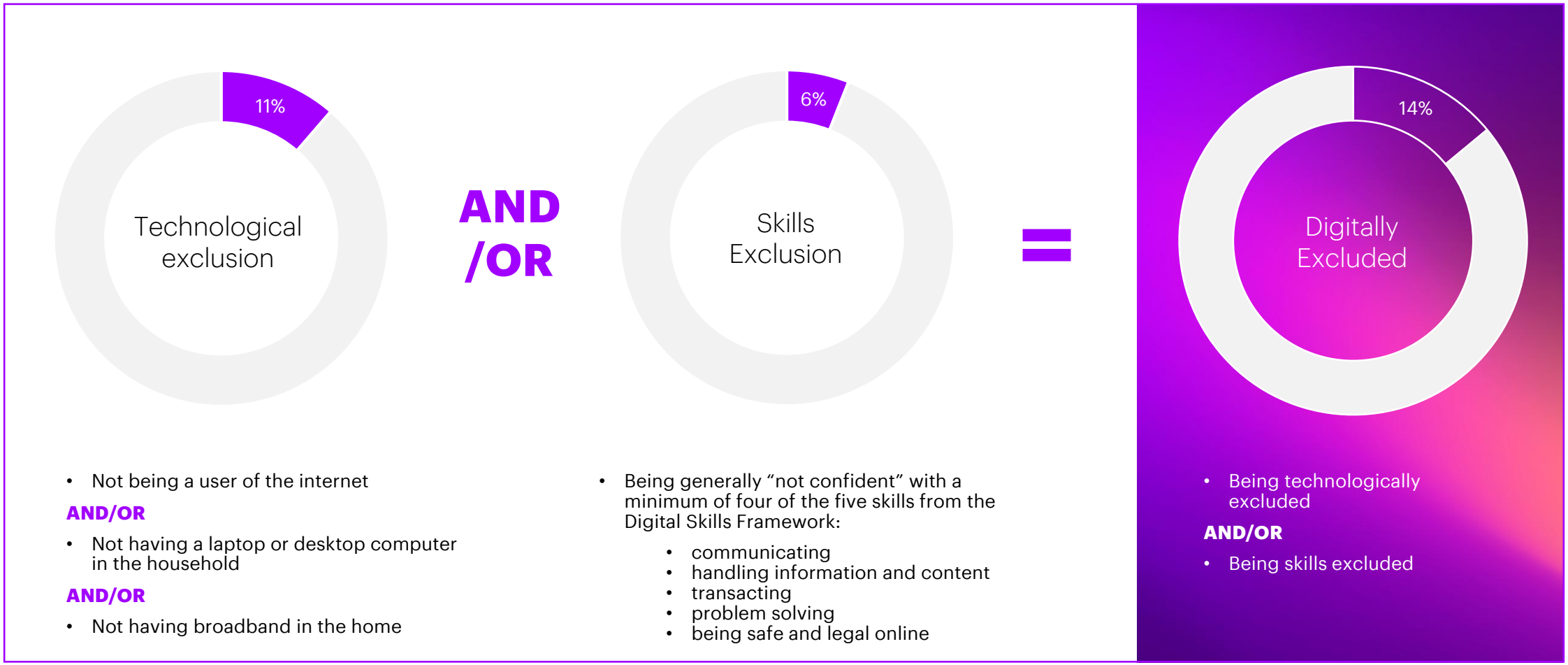
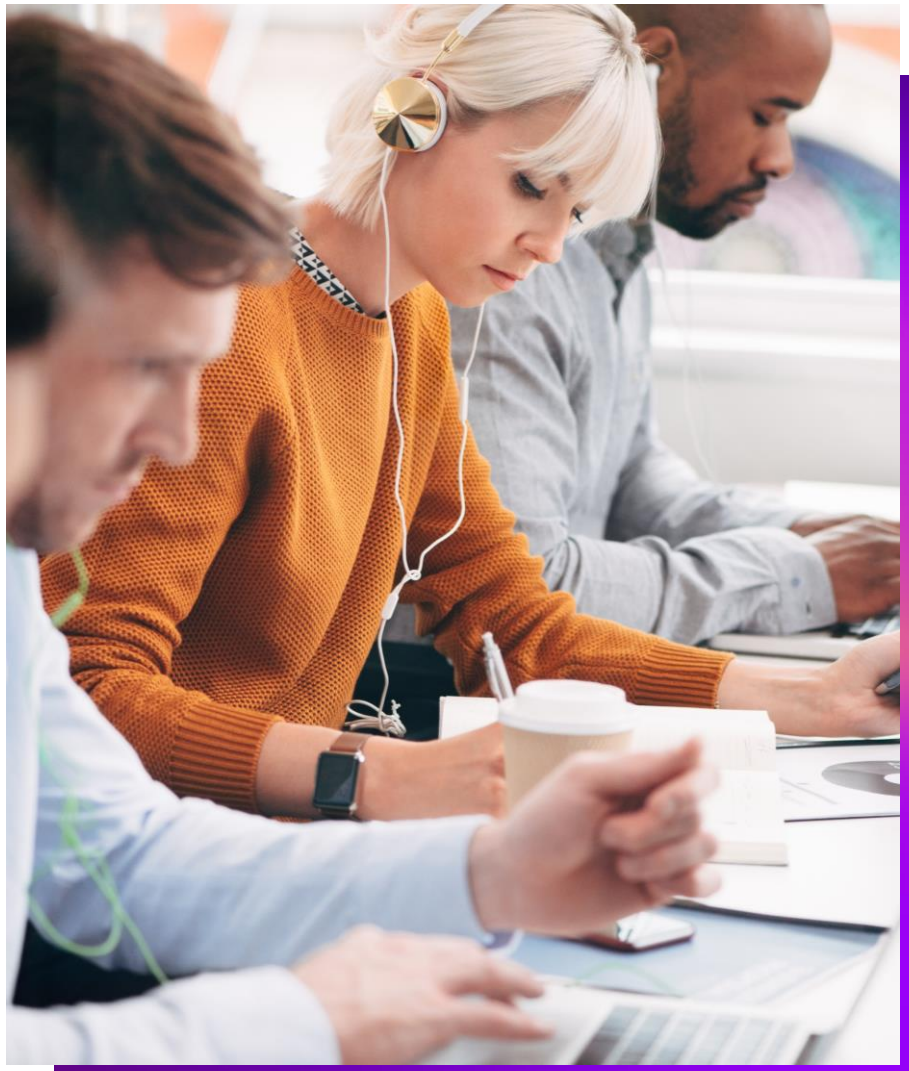


Figure 4: The digitally excluded population as a combination of technology access and digital skills.



Case study: Accenture Digital Skills

Accenture Digital Skills was launched in response to the growing digital skills gap globally. It offers a suite of bite-sized, animated learning that develops digital confidence in those looking to enhance their employability or build a business. Featuring Accenture experts, the courses include videos, quizzes and activities to stimulate social interaction and collaboration with other learners.

Eight free, online courses are offered through our partner FutureLearn, and cover a variety of topics. Introductory courses help learners make sense of the ever-evolving digital world, from understanding what digital means to how digital has evolved in the world of work.

These include:

- Digital Skills for Work and Life - for those new to the world of work
- Reimagine Your Career - for those looking to change role or flex their skills to meet the new challenges in an increasingly digital work environment

The remaining courses provide a more in depth exploration of key digital skills that are increasingly important in the workplace today including Social Media, Artificial Intelligence, Digital Marketing, Mobile, User Experience and Web Analytics.

Since the launch of Digital Skills in 2017, we have collaborated with a network of partner organisations across welfare to work, government, NGOs, and education sectors, to expand our reach to the communities that need support, helping over 200,000 people build the skills they need to thrive in the digital economy.

Visit our landing page to access the learning: www.futurelearn.com

Closing the Divide

As jobs and the economy increasingly digitise, narrowing the divisions that exist today could be critical. Even in 2019, the UK government found that digital skills were an essential requirement of 83% of online vacancies reviewed[3] and this figure is likely to have grown since then. If people are not able to make active, productive use of this technology, then they might struggle to keep up with a progressively more digital UK society.

Where the digital divide currently mirrors existing social divides, this effort could also have a significant impact on social mobility. Where the picture is more complex, interventions should be highly targeted to give affected groups the support they really need.

While government has a significant role to play here, they are by no means the only participants. Business, academia, and civil society organisations all have a part to play in creating a sustainable and inclusive digital economy as the UK recovers and rebuilds post-pandemic.

This report focuses on three key priorities for achieving this goal:

1

Tackling technology exclusion
In an increasingly digitised society, it is vital that digital access does not become a new form of social exclusion and that the impact on families already experiencing other forms of exclusion is not exacerbated.

2

Improving digital skills and confidence
Many adults in the UK are both less confident doing things online than in person and already feel left behind by the pace of technology. These people must be equipped to continue to reskill and upskill throughout their lives to keep pace with ongoing digital change.

3

Building accessible digital public services
People expect public sector services to become increasingly digital. However, there is a need for key services to continue to be accessible for all, whether digital or in person.

Tackling Technology Exclusion

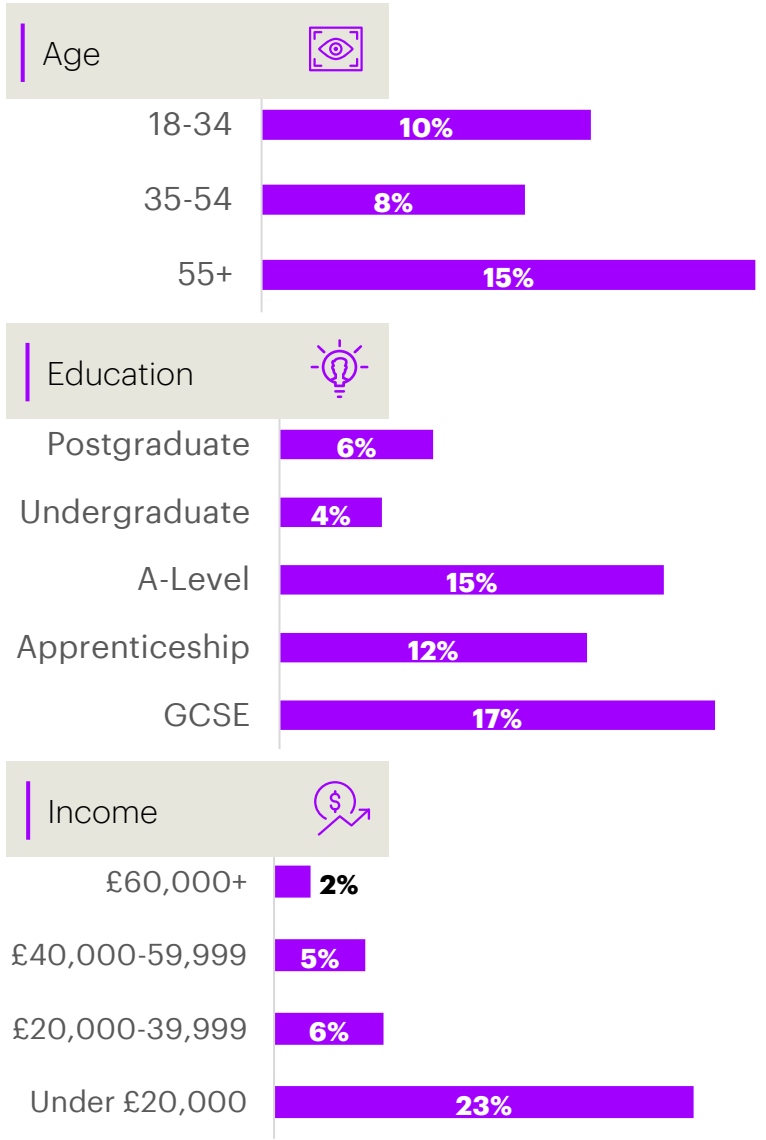
Understanding Technology Exclusion

Three percent of the UK population told us that they do not use the internet at all. While it is encouraging that 97% do, that 3% still represents around 1.65 million adults.

Additionally, 5% do not have broadband access and 9% do not have a laptop or desktop computer in their homes. While they may have access to other devices and slower internet speeds, these are key tools for making productive use of the internet and being an active participant in the digital economy through remote working, online learning, searching for jobs, and other similar activities.

As with overall digital exclusion, technology exclusion disproportionately affects certain groups. People with household incomes below £20,000 (23%), over 55s (15%), and those without a university education (17%) are more likely than average (11%) to report technological exclusion. Not only could this lack of access make it difficult to play a role in the digital economy, it could also present challenges for accessing vital public services.

Figure 5: Proportion of each demographic group who experience technology exclusion only.



Enabling a national digital workforce

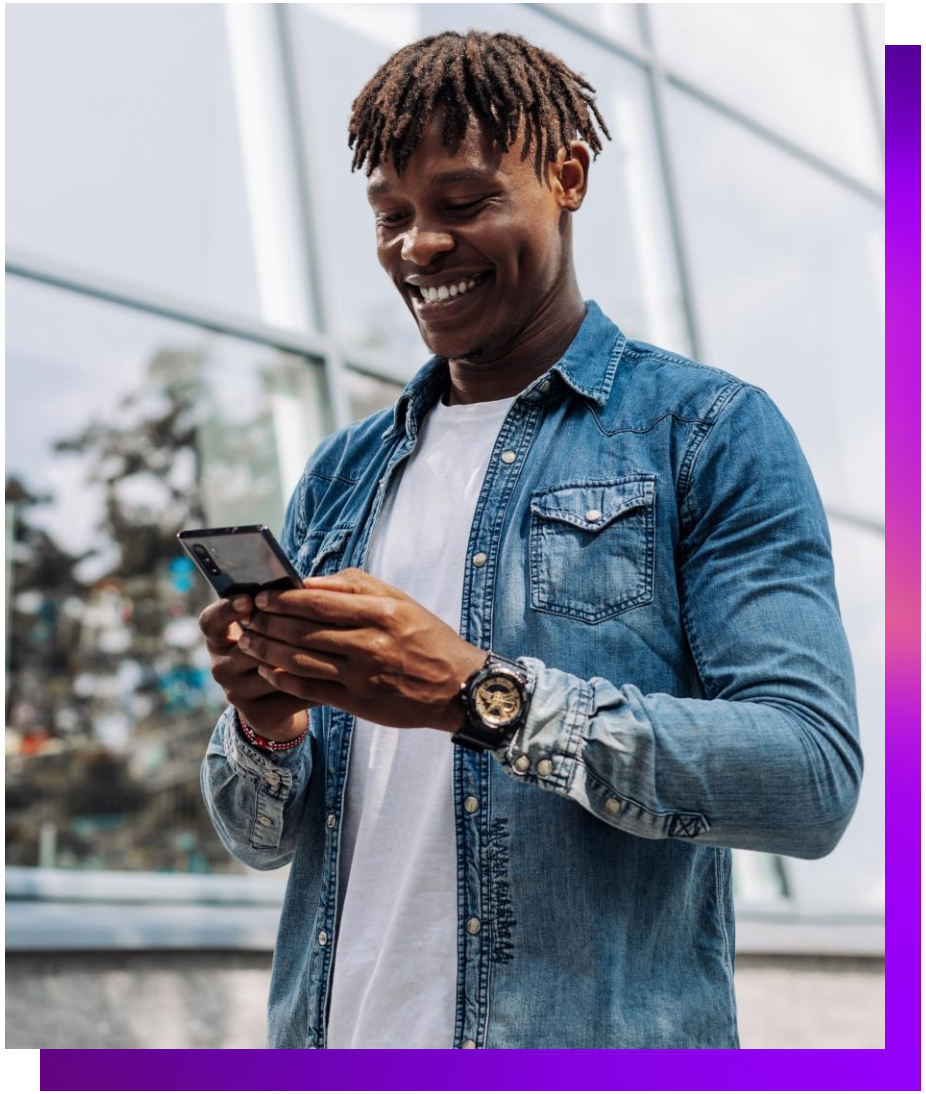
Our research has shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic nearly two-thirds (64%) of the UK's working population has been able to work remotely. This was a major shift and helped insulate a variety of sectors.

Many we talked to expected this shift would be long lasting. Most respondents (85%) thought access to jobs and public services will become increasingly digitised. This shift to digital could have a profound impact on the distribution of wealth and jobs across the country. However, we will need to ensure the benefits are evenly felt.

Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case currently. Those in households with incomes lower than £20,000 (76% vs 82% for higher incomes), without university education (71% vs 86% for those with university degrees), or over 55 (71% vs 81% for those under 55) were all less likely than other groups to report that technology can help them do their job.

This feeling that technology is a hindrance to work seems to be linked to a more negative perception of digitalisation. These same individuals – households with incomes below £20,000 (43% vs 33% for higher incomes), without a university education (41% vs 33% for those with university degrees), and over-55 (51% vs 31% for those under 55) – were also all more likely than other groups to say they feel left behind by the pace of technology change.

Unsurprisingly, these are the same individuals who reported higher levels of technology exclusion in our survey. Care should be taken so that limited technology access today does not create challenges in an increasingly digital economy.



Case study: Good Things Foundation

Good Things Foundation is a leading digital inclusion charity working in the UK, Australia and beyond. Founded in 2011, it has helped over 3.3 million people improve their lives through better digital skills. Their aim is to fix the digital divide for good and help people thrive in a digital world.

They believe that every community should have a place where people can get help with digital access, skills and confidence. Especially those who are furthest behind from being digitally included - recognising digital inclusion has become essential for social and economic inclusion.

Good Things Foundation supports a UK-wide network of community partners. Many work with left behind and marginalised communities, and in areas of high unemployment, poverty, and health inequalities. They help community partners to embed digital inclusion in their services and support – recognising that the shift towards digital first strategies – across the public sector, banking, commerce – means that people need digital confidence to access those services safely and confidently.

Good Things Foundation recognises the multiple barriers people face in developing digital skills, from devices to internet access to confidence. They provide support to try and combat these – including Everyone Connected and the National Databank to address device and data poverty.

www.goodthingsfoundation.org

Tackling technology exclusion

Whilst many issues are already being addressed, we think there are three key questions to ask to begin to address technology exclusion.

	Understanding the challenge	Acting to address it	Collaborating for long term success
For Government	What pieces of technology (e.g. laptops) are currently essential to ensure inclusion, where are they most needed and how might technology change create or help address exclusion?	How do we target population segments who have traditionally been technology excluded?	What organisations can we work with to roll out technology to underrepresented groups?
For Business	Do our products and services increase or alleviate technology exclusion (e.g. requiring a smartphone app for two factor authentication)?	How might we use our existing customer touchpoints to help reach people who are currently technology excluded (e.g. physical stores as a gateway to digital services)?	How can we work with others in our ecosystem– competitors and partners – to address technology exclusion collectively?

Improving digital skills and confidence

Understanding skills exclusion

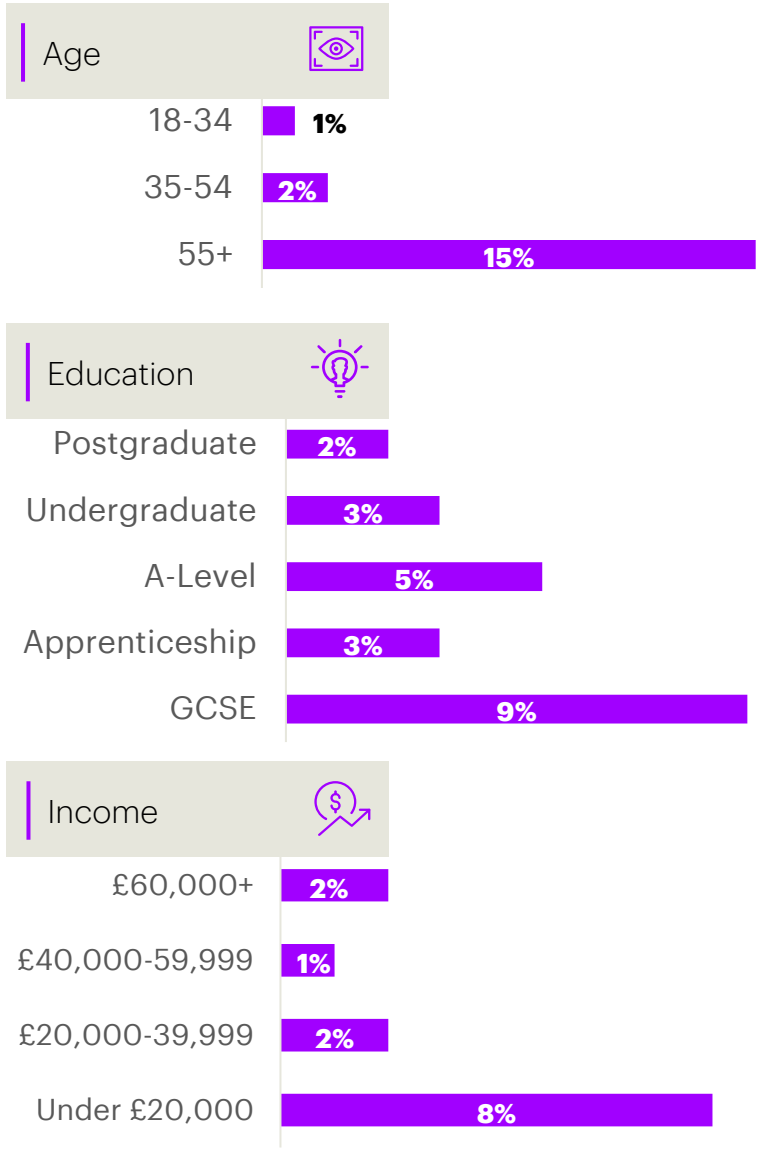
The pace of technology change has a direct impact on digital confidence. Our polling has identified two major schools of thought - one group sees technology as an enabler, the other sees it as a threat.

Many feel left behind by an increasingly digital world. When asked, 40% say they are generally less confident doing things online than in person and 41% say they feel left behind by the pace of technology. As with digital exclusion overall, our research found that skills exclusion was impacting some

communities more than others. Those from households with incomes of less than £20,000 (8%), over-55s (15%), and people without a university education (9%) were more likely than average (6%) to report that they lacked the digital skills they needed for everyday life.

Closing this divide could be key to ensuring the country as a whole benefits from an increasingly digital economy. As initiatives look to expand access to digital tools, it is important that those people feel confident and capable to make use of these new opportunities.

Figure 6: Proportion of each demographic group, who experience skills exclusion only.



Work vs Play

Our research tells us that on average people in the UK spend eight hours a day online. However, there is a big distinction between those who use it mostly for work and those who use it mostly for social purposes. Whilst many are avid social media users, they may lack the skills to gain from the benefits of the growing digital economy.

Once again we see similar demographic divides in how people use the internet. Those from some groups spend significantly less time working or studying online per day compared to other groups. This includes households with incomes of less than £20,000 (26% less), those without a university education (30% less), or individuals in the over-55 age bracket (36% less).

This is not surprising since these groups were also less likely to say that they have the skills to do their job digitally. For those from households with incomes of less than £20,000, this gap was moderate (70% vs 74% for higher incomes), but for over-55s (59% vs 74% for those under 55) and people who had not been to university (62% vs 77% for those with university degrees), the gap was more marked.

Interestingly, whilst younger generations tend to be more positive about the use of technology for work or education, there are still a significant number who worry. Recent research found that less than a quarter (24%) of young people (16-21 year-olds) were confident in securing a technology job in the future[4].

This points to a need for more life-long learning to help support these people as they enter the workforce, progress in their careers, and encounter ongoing technology change.

"We're worried about the high numbers of 'limited users'. Such as younger people - who are social media only, smartphone only users - they may seem confident, but when you actually explore what they're doing online it can be very limited."

Helen Milner OBE, Chief Executive
Good Things Foundation

Case study: Stay Nimble

Stay Nimble is a social enterprise which helps people with career transitions. It was founded in 2019 and the platform was co-created with Accenture as part of the 'Future of Inclusive Work' initiative. Stay Nimble currently supports over 11,000 people who are looking to rethink their career aspirations and open up new opportunities that lead to more resilient long-term jobs.

They support people to understand their own strengths, skills, and experience and match them to open recruitment roles in their local area. During the pandemic, as people experienced a multitude of additional challenges in their lives, the offering evolved to provide access to a career development coach to support people to be more resilient and explore the transferable skills – or new skills – they need to develop to best position themselves to take on these roles.

Stay Nimble helps develop a mindset that opens people up to ongoing learning and career transitions that are essential to help people thrive in the digital economy.

www.staynimble.co.uk

Improving digital skills and confidence

Whilst many issues are already being addressed, we think there are three key questions to ask to begin to address the skills gap.

	Understanding the challenge	Acting to address it	Collaborating for long term success
For Government	As the digital economy grows and changes, how will the definition of essential digital skills change with it?	What role can my department play in addressing the digital skills gap?	How can government successfully work with organisations and groups that are already helping people develop digital skills?
For Business	Do our people have the skills they need to be active participants in the digital economy beyond their role?	How might we use our products and services to improve digital skills training for customers, clients, and employees?	Can we work with partners to roll out our existing training and development programmes in areas of need?

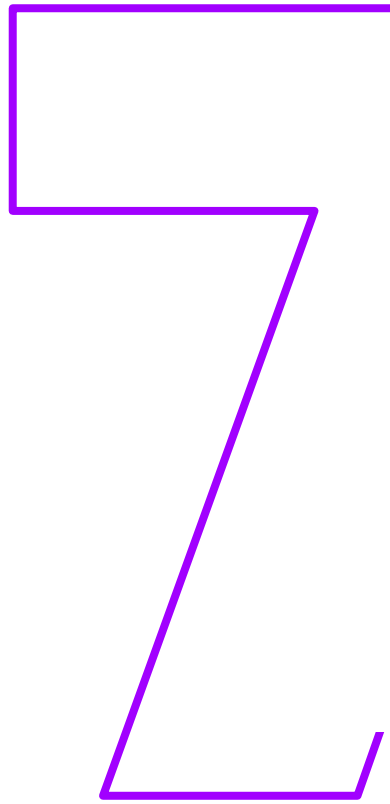

Building accessible
digital public services

Understanding the future of public services

The public services of the future should seamlessly integrate into peoples' lives and deliver sustainable value for citizens. This could manifest in a range of ways. Tax assessment and payments could connect with open banking to make the process more efficient for all. Benefit eligibility could be automated to ensure that payments are made as soon as someone is entitled to them. And healthcare providers might help keep people healthy with predictive and preventative interventions based on data. Digital channels could play a major role in creating this seamless experience. But what about those people who are digitally excluded?

Digital enablement will not happen over night, so people need to be able to access public services physically. Equally, there are some segments of the UK population who might simply never find digital channels inclusive and they will need ongoing non-digital access points.

However, a seamless, digitally-enabled experience could still support those who are digitally excluded. One approach could be to build on existing infrastructure and physical touchpoints with government services to convey the benefits of digital integration. For example, job centres could be used to provide access to a range of other connected services for those who are out of work and digitally excluded. Alternatively, employers, who already pay tax on employees behalf, could help connect their people to more government services and systems.



7 Million

Our research found that 14% of respondents face some form of digital exclusion caused by limited access to digital services or because they lack the skills, confidence, and motivation to make use of them.

Case study: Irish Revenue

With more than 3 million calls a year to answer, The Office of the Revenue Commissioners in Ireland (Revenue) wanted to find a way to provide taxpayers from all backgrounds with a more efficient way to get support and answers to their questions.

Many of these calls are from customers who cannot self serve in a digital channel either due to digital proficiency, confidence, or gaps in the digital service portfolio.

Working with Accenture, they harnessed the power of AI and cutting-edge natural language processing to create an automated service that could take calls, understand the caller, and answer their questions – a world-first. This all happens in an instant, at the same speed as a human conversation.

Following extensive testing and customer validation, Revenue's voicebot went live in July 2018, and it did not take long to demonstrate its success. Within the first six weeks, it had already handled over 2000 calls, but more importantly, it was popular with customers. Only 10% are transferred due to a failure to understand. The results? Revenue is delivering improved customer service, with greater efficiency and at lower cost.

Doing public services differently

Designing digital services that meet the needs of everyone is a continuous process, but we think there are three key considerations.

Involve digitally excluded users from the start

As with all design, including the Government Design Principles[5], the key is including people early in the process. Research to support new service needs and design should include the digitally excluded. By building on the existing usability testing already being done, it could help teams understand the unique requirements and circumstances of the digitally excluded to design services that straddle digital and physical channels.

The result could be a new framework for inclusive design. This could be incorporated with other accessibility frameworks from the Government Digital Service, such as having transcripts for sight impaired users, or sit alongside these existing requirements, recognising where they overlap.

Help users get the best of both worlds

Digital public services are already helping millions of citizens in the UK to access the services and support they need, and creating real efficiencies for government and taxpayers. Addressing the needs of the digitally excluded should build on these successes rather than replacing them.

As departments incorporate the needs of the digitally excluded, changes are likely to fall into two groups. Reasonable accommodations to digital services and services that need to be delivered in other ways for some users. Drawing this line could help avoid compromising usability for the majority by trying to be accessible for all in a single digital channel.

Listen, monitor and adapt

Who is digitally excluded and how that exclusion manifests itself may change dramatically over the next 10 years. To keep up with this, it is critical to listen to users, monitor how services are being used, and adapt them over time.

This agile delivery approach is already being used in many areas of the UK government. Expanding its use could help to embed change at the heart of digital and physical service design. This is as much a shift in mindset as it is a shift in approach, but success could mean services that continue to meet user's needs for decades to come.

About The Research

To understand these issues in greater detail Accenture undertook a nationally representative (by age, gender and region) quantitative survey of 1,000 UK adults. To ensure we avoided bias in our research we conducted this survey via telephone, with interviews lasting for around 15-minutes. All interviews were conducted during January and February 2021.

In order to supplement the quantitative survey, we also undertook a series of 7 in-depth interviews with key organisations working to improve digital inclusion across the UK. These interviews typically lasted 30-45 minutes and were used to gain a better perspective on the issues and challenges that individuals face and how the whole UK ecosystem is and can better support a more digital Britain.

References

1. State of the Nation 2020 – 21: Social Mobility in Great Britain
2. Guidance overview: Essential digital skills framework
3. No Longer Optional: Employer Demand for Digital Skills
4. UK – less than a quarter of generation z jobseekers confident in getting a tech job
5. Government Design Principles

About Accenture

Accenture is a global professional services company with leading capabilities in digital, cloud and security. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries, we offer Strategy and Consulting, Interactive, Technology and Operations services — all powered by the world's largest network of Advanced Technology and Intelligent Operations centres. Our 624,000 people deliver on the promise of technology and human ingenuity every day, serving clients in more than 120 countries. We embrace the power of change to create value and shared success for our clients, people, shareholders, partners and communities. Visit us at www.accenture.com

Accenture Digital Skills

Accenture is working to improve the UK's digital divide through a range of programmes and initiatives.

- Future Learn – Accenture offers a range of free, online courses. Digital Skills: Reimagine Your Career and Digital Skills: Digital Skills for Work and Life help develop technical skills and prepare individuals for a digitally focused work environment.
- FutureDotNow – Accenture is a founding member of FutureDotNow, a coalition of UK organisations working to motivate people and businesses to boost their digital skills.
- Movement to Work – This programme provides people with the right digital skills to get into employment or start their own business.