Facilitating a smooth technological transition for citizens returning from prison

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When searching for a job, most of us click onto a company website or a popular career site, push a few buttons, and apply. Even in our highly connected world, however, not everyone can find a job from behind a

computer screen.

In particular, formerly incarcerated individuals—or returning citizens—struggle to find work and reintegrate due to a lack of digital literacy, according to a recently published article by University of Michigan researchers.

"For some returning citizens, there's a 'Rip Van Winkle effect' when they are offered digital technology upon reentry," said Kentaro Toyama, senior author of the study, referring to the popular tale of the man who fell asleep in the woods and emerged some 20 years later.

"One of the things that most affects digital literacy for returning citizens is time spent in prison, of course."

Toyama and colleagues Ihudiya Finda Ogbonnaya-Ogburu and Tawanna Dillahunt, all from the U-M School of Information, presented their research recently at the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems in Glasgow, Scotland.

"Our work is probably the first empirical look at digital literacy for returning citizens in the age of smartphones," Toyama said.

Their research occurred in two parts. First, they interviewed 23 returning citizens. Even from a relatively small sample, the diversity of age and prison time was significant. Time spent in prison ranged from 6 months to 45 years.

They found that returning citizen participants still had career aspirations and an entrepreneurial spirit. In one case, a returning citizen (age 55+) admitted to running a small lottery in prison in order to make more money than the wage offered for menial prison jobs.

In the second part, the researchers piloted a digital literacy course for a handful of participants. These classes were designed to teach the skills required to navigate the modern job search. Among other things, they found that returning citizens had difficulty distinguishing legitimate websites from those that overwhelm users with ads and dialog boxes.

"Ideally, training for returning citizens should be very task-focused due to the diversity of those trying to learn about digital technology after prison," Toyama said.

Though there are digital literacy courses for returning citizens offered as community programs across the country, Toyama believes the topic requires more study.

Many returning citizens rely heavily on friends and family for informal digital learning, but there must be additional advocacy for these individuals who are willing to become working, productive citizens in society, he said.

"Returning citizens struggle in a variety of ways to re-integrate, and newer digital technologies pose yet another challenge. Returning citizens need more support to gain better digital literacy," Toyama said.

More information: Ihudiya Finda Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al. Towards an Effective Digital Literacy Intervention to Assist Returning Citizens with Job Search, *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - CHI '19* (2019). DOI: 10.1145/3290605.3300315

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