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Executive Summary

Digital mentors are at the frontline of efforts to improve the digital skills, literacy and inclusion of Australians. Most are volunteers, and many have undertaken their own journey to improve their digital participation. With approximately 1 million volunteer hours offered through the Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association (ASCCA) since it began in August 1998, for example, we can confidently say that digital mentors are the heart of the digital revolution.

This report provides a summary and evaluation of the Digital Mentors: The Heart of the Digital Revolution Forum held in Sydney on 26 July, 2019. The event attracted more than 80 mentors, program managers, and leaders of organisations involved in digital mentoring.

The aim of the forum was to establish the challenges, opportunities and requirements to build and sustain a nation-wide digital mentoring revolution. This report sets out the stories of those who presented at the event, and the collective challenges, ‘lessons learnt’ and opportunities that were discussed throughout the day in interactive design workshops led by Designit. The report concludes with a set of five recommendations.

The five recommendations established through the event are not exhaustive of the work, input and innovation needed to extend the movement of digital mentoring in Australia, but provides, at least, a starting point.

1. Invest nationally and locally in raising awareness about the importance of digital inclusion for all Australians

2. Extend research to understand the key barriers to digital inclusion and participation, and develop best practice approaches to effective digital mentoring

3. Inject new funding into programs that offer long-term digital mentoring and ensure their sustainability, visibility and availability for all who need them

4. Promote coordination and collaboration among organisations that support digital mentors, to avoid competitive practices

5. Innovate to improve ICT access, and through funding mechanisms that might see digital mentoring as an essential social service, as these can go a long way toward improving digital skills and participation
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Digital mentors: the heart of the digital revolution

A FORUM HELD ON 26 JULY, 2019, THE ROCKS, SYDNEY

On 26 July, 2019, around 80 people came together in Sydney, on Gadigal lands, to address the role that digital mentors play in improving digital inclusion and literacy in Australia. The event had the following objectives:

- To strengthen networks of people working to close the digital divide & discuss lessons learnt from common experiences
- To hear diverse perspectives of the purpose, strategies & evaluation and reporting mechanisms in successful digital mentoring programs
- To hear about different approaches to overcoming the digital divide, with a particular focus on the role of digital mentors and the experience of learners
- To identify the challenges that we face in developing the capacity of ALL Australians to be full digital citizens, who are capable of accessing services & participating in community life
- To discuss what we need to do, to overcome these challenges together
- To identify key recommendations that establish how public, private and the third sector organisations can assist us to close the digital divide
This summary report provides an overview of the discussions that took place at the *Digital Mentors: The Heart of the Digital Revolution Forum*, and presents recommendations for growing and improving digital mentoring in Australia. We acknowledge the input, experiences and expertise of each of the participants who took part in these discussions, and note that this summary can only be a partial, distilled account of the ideas generated on the day.

**What is digital mentoring?**

Leep defines a digital mentor as “someone who provides face-to-face, one-on-one-support to help people learn about how to use their tech devices (whether phone, laptop, computer or tablet) and helps them build the skills and confidence necessary to use the internet, so that they can be part of the digital society and economy”.¹

There is growing recognition that mentors and mentoring offer an effective model for improving the digital skills and literacy of those left behind in the digital economy.

Mentoring is understood to be vital to helping those seeking to get online or improve their digital skills and safety. A recent report for the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, for example, explores the potential benefits of mentoring carried out by young people, older peers, family members and volunteers undertaking digital inclusion work.²

As in other sectors, such as mental health, mentoring is increasingly seen as a vital way of reaching those most in need in society, beyond the formal provision of social services.³

In their collaborative work with Australia Post, Dezuanni and colleagues note the “critical gap in valuing and understanding the role digital mentoring plays in helping learners to develop their digital skills and confidence”.⁴

The settings and models for digital mentoring vary greatly and range from informal to formal, and with varying degrees of professionalisation. While organisations that tackle the digital divide are developing resources to help trainers, employees or volunteers to provide mentoring, there is much to do in establishing effective best practice.

The *Digital Mentors Forum* sought to collect experiences from those directly providing or managing digital mentoring in a range of community contexts. Panel presentations showcased existing mentoring programs and models, and were followed by a series of targeted design workshops.
The selection of programs that speakers profiled and the expert discussion among forum participants offered substantial insights into the state of play in digital mentoring, the challenges, and where we are headed.

This summary report begins with the stories presented in three panel sessions. This is followed by a summary of the design workshops and an overview of challenges and lessons. The report concludes with a series of recommendations.

Our Stories: Closing the digital divide

The forum heard from leaders from seven organisations involved in digital skills and literacy training around Australia. Each shared their approach to digital mentoring and model of operation, describing the processes of recruiting and training digital mentors, facilitating learning, and the content and evaluation of programs. They also outlined how programs have developed and changed over time.

Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association (ASCCA)

The program: The Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association (ASCCA) seeks to assist a national network of seniors computer clubs in educating seniors in the use of digital technology to enrich their lives and help make them more self-reliant. Our mission is also to bridge the generation gap and empower seniors to benefit the community through their collective experience and knowledge. We are the recognised national peak body for seniors and technology. ASCCA has clubs in every state and territory of Australia and exists to support seniors enjoy information technology – to become digitally literate at their own pace in a non-threatening environment and to have fun whilst doing so.

In the 21st century information technology includes far more than just computers. ASCCA liaises with all levels of government regarding policy issues affecting information communication technology and seniors. ASCCA has over 100 member clubs serving approximately 10,000 seniors per week.

Recruiting digital mentors: We have previously employed well qualified trainers, where possible with computer club experience but at the moment are using volunteers who are or have been trainers in seniors’ computer clubs. Sometimes, project funding allows us to employ a mentor or trainer for a short period of time.

Working with learners: Apart from the learning opportunities offered in our Learning Centre which is based in the
Sydney CBD we are now developing sessions via video conferencing to help us reach clubs located in areas beyond the reasonable travel distance from our Learning Centre. It is also suitable for cluster opportunities.

Our main way of working with learners is to assist communities to establish computer clubs for seniors and the support existing clubs to grow and remain viable. ASCCA also develops resources for use by the clubs, and encourages innovation and best practice. We also organise and run a two-day annual national conference, members’ forums, and seminars on specific topics such as assistive technology and cyber security.

**Training Mentors:** One of the prime uses of the ASCCA Learning Centre is to provide training for club trainers (ASCCA uses the term Trainers rather than Mentors – it is up to individual clubs to decide on the terminology they use). The Learning Centre provides opportunities for Trainers to attend sessions to become better able to train their club’s members.

Learning more about mobile devices is extremely popular as are more specialised topics for special interest activities such as digital photography. Trainers not only access additional skills to improve their training abilities and range of skills but they also leave with handouts and training material for use within their club.

**Changes over time:** Just like the clubs in the ASCCA network we need to change with the times. The greatest interest at the moment is providing learning opportunities relating to mobile devices.

**Key Challenges and Highlights:**

**Challenges:** The greatest challenge for ASCCA is lack of funding. We seek project funding but it does nothing to cover core costs or further development. We have spent more than 20 years developing ways forward but do not have the funds to implement many of them. ASCCA is run by seniors for seniors who are unpaid.

**Highlights:** We have given more than a million
volunteer hours helping to empower Australian seniors through technology.

**Parramatta Computer Pals**

**The program:** The Parramatta Computer Pals program is run in Parramatta CBD using space provided free of charge by the City of Parramatta. The club currently has 200 members and approximately 40 volunteers, including trainers, assistant trainers, office assistants, IT support, committee members and other roles. Computer Pals promotes its programs through its website, printed brochures in libraries and other outlets, club newsletters, member meetings and occasional stories in local media. Parramatta Computer Pals is a member of ASCCA.

**Recruiting digital mentors:** Mentors are recruited through different channels, including GoVolunteer and Leep Volunteer Solutions. Some members who have completed programs have also become mentors.

**Working with learners:** Parramatta Computer Pals classes consist mostly of structured learning in sessions running from 2 to 10 hours. The club also offer one-to-one sessions and informal group discussions (special interest groups and user groups). Participants learn computer skills ranging from a basic ‘Introduction to Computers’ to more advanced content such as how to create photo books. Parramatta Computer Pals offer learning across Windows, Android and iOS/Apple platforms.

**Training mentors:** Mentors take part in an induction and on the job training (in which they start as an assistant trainer and an observer to an experienced trainer). They also take part in occasional formal Train-the-Trainer courses and monthly Trainer Forums.

**Changes over time:** Computer Pals has recently shifted its focus away from computer skills and towards mobile device digital literacy. Parramatta Computer Pals have found that shorter courses are preferred as they are more flexible and can accommodate people with multiple commitments.

**Key Challenges and Highlights:**

**Challenges:** Parramatta Computer Pals have had difficulty finding and keeping volunteers, developing and updating course materials, and identifying training needs (staying relevant to learner needs). The greatest challenge is lack of funding. Often, the funding available only covers specific projects and does not cover ongoing costs or further program development. For more than 20 years, Parramatta Computer Pals has been developing ways forward but do not have the funds to implement many new initiatives. **Highlights:** As part of ASSCA, we have contributed in giving more than a million volunteer hours
helping to empower Australian seniors through technology.

**Brisbane Seniors Online (BSOL)**

The program: Brisbane Seniors OnLine (BSOL) was formed in 2001 as a 100% voluntary, not-for-profit incorporated organisation operating in the Brisbane metropolitan area. Lessons are tailored to individual learner needs and cover subjects including, email, computer security, maintenance of computer operating systems, and management of files, photos, and user accounts. Lessons take place in the home on the participant’s computer, at BSOL’s Woolloongabba Computer Training Centre, or in a public space such as a library or coffee shop. Currently, BSOL’s member-base consists of: 143 mentors, 30 volunteers and 595 learners.

The BSOL model provides one-on-one support on the participant’s device. BSOL operates via 8-10 geographically defined “Hubs”. Each Hub has an experienced mentor who acts as the Hub Coordinator. Membership enquiries are directed by phone or application form to a central administration office, which is referred to the Hub Coordinator who assesses the applicant’s needs, devices, operating system etc., and allocates a suitable mentor. Central administration also seeks feedback from mentors.

**Recruiting digital mentors:** BSOL has advertised extensively on radio and in seniors’ magazines. The majority of mentors are recruited through word of mouth. BSOL has a long-standing relationship with Brisbane Libraries, which helps in the recruitment of some mentors. Volunteer Queensland is the source of a small number of mentors, and many longer-term learners graduate to become mentors.

**Working with learners:** BSOL mentoring covers a number of basics such as security, avoiding scams and spam, and establishing email and other identities. BSOL Mentors focus on what the learner
wants to learn. In earlier years there was a set curriculum based on MS Windows, but tailored mentoring is now more appropriate given the explosion of devices, operating systems and applications.

**Training mentors:** Apart from a compulsory induction session, BSOL has no specific training for mentors, but use a mentor support group, mentor notice board (this is a blog on the website where mentors can ask technical questions which are answered by those with knowledge), and an Apple special interest group. A minor issue that BSOL faces is that some mentors do not want to update their own technical knowledge as hardware and software change. In previous years information seminar days titled “BSOLutions” were held. These were full day sessions that included presentations on new and emerging technologies or demonstrations of specific apps or devices. These are currently on hold as BSOL lack a Training Officer.

**Changes over time:** In 2001, BSOL provided basic computer skills training on one device (Windows PC running XP), especially email & virus protection. Between 2007 and 2010 BSOL introduced training on the use of iPhones, iPads and other devices as there was a sharp rise in demand for these skills from learners. This generated a noticeable decline in the number of mentors as many did not wish to make the transition to mobile device training. In 2015/16 there was a significant increase in the demand for help on Windows 10. Since 2017, there have been very few new learners who start without basic digital skills. Most requests are for support on specific problems with specific apps on specific devices (often related to disabilities and assistive technologies).

**Key Challenges and Highlights:**

**Challenges:** New learner demand is coming from areas outside the Brisbane Local Government Area. Declining membership has resulted in a reduction in revenue, making future viability uncertain. It is becoming more difficult to recruit and retain mentors and many of our current mentors are unwilling to learn about new operating systems and devices. There are very few ‘new learners’, because most are already online but suffer from a lack of confidence, currency, and support on specific problems with specific Apps on specific devices. This leads to some difficulty with finding mentors for a learner’s specific combination of needs.
Tech Savvy Seniors

The program: Tech Savvy Seniors provides low-cost or free training for seniors on computers, tablets and smartphones. It is delivered through co-investment partnerships between Telstra and State governments and run largely within local libraries and Community Colleges who receive a grant. Since the program was launched in NSW in 2014, more than 154,000 seniors have participated. The training sessions are conducted by professional trainers or library staff. The program is offered in approximately 200 communities each year. The culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) Tech Savvy Seniors program was developed to help older people from CALD backgrounds.

Working with learners: The Tech Savvy Senior approach is through structured learning using resources, adapted to the needs of individual participants.

Changes over time: The program is guided by the results of the Australian Digital Inclusion index, which outlines who is most at risk of digital exclusion and where digital skills training is most needed. Over time Tech Savvy Seniors have added modules to help seniors best interact with changes in the digital world – for instance, courses on ‘How to use Transport Apps’ and ‘How to manage your digital assets’, especially in preparation for end of life.

Key Highlights: A Social Return on Investment report was recently completed by Ernst & Young (EY) on behalf of Telstra and the NSW Government, in order to evaluate the social impact of the Tech Savvy Seniors NSW CALD program. Overall, EY’s evaluation showed a social return on investment of $3.61 for every $1 invested in the program for the period of July 2016 to June 2017. This highlights that the program is highly effective in supporting older people from CALD communities to increase their digital literacy and reflects the importance of digital literacy in today’s economy.
**Leep NGO**

*The program:* Since 2015, Leep has delivered one-on-one digital mentoring powered by volunteers. In 2016-17, with funding from NSW Family and Community Services, Leep established a network of 53 local partners providing digital literacy programs, of which 16 were supported with their delivery. The network was supplemented by an online portal run in partnership with Good Things Foundation UK. In 2017, Leep partnered with Good Things Foundation Australia to support 20 digital mentoring hubs in Western Sydney. In July 2018, Leep launched an outreach program, funded by the Department of Health, which delivers digital mentoring programs across Western Sydney and western NSW.

Leep coordinates 18 programs, 16 of which are outreach programs. To date, Leep has recruited and trained more than 60 digital mentors who have supported approximately 600 learners over nearly 2000 hours of digital mentoring.

*Recruiting digital mentors:* Leep recruits mentors through online platforms, word of mouth, promotion at community events and universities.

*Working with learners:* With Leep, participants are learning the basics; namely texting, emailing, managing photographs and using social media. Most learners want to learn to connect and communicate with friends or family. Leep is currently investigating methods to encourage learners to develop in higher-level functional skills in order to make sure they are benefiting from all technology has to offer.

Leep records the progress of learners. Participants complete online progress forms and these are integrated into a CRM database that can generate reports and program monitoring (e.g. new learner forms, session records, outcomes survey). Learners self-assess during follow up surveys.

*Training mentors:* Leep delivers training through a number of digital platforms and has its own resources including a digital mentor handbook, digital mentor WHS video and volunteering handbook. It also has Zoom meetings for induction.
and training and holds training workshops for continuous improvement (for example, it recently ran a scam workshop). These workshops also provide a mechanism for two-way feedback that informs the evaluation and improvement of systems and programs.

**Changes over time:** In 2015, Leep launched iPad classes and in the following year launched an onsite one-on-one mentoring program for all devices. In 2017, Leep began capacity building for other organisations to start their own programs. In 2018, Leep launched an outreach program, managing a network of mentoring programs. Leep has developed systems to allow it to manage this network as remotely as possible.

**Key Challenges and Highlights:**

**Challenges:** securing funding that includes investment in volunteers, incentivising partners to be involved, recruiting enough learners (particularly those in hard-to-reach communities), mentor management and motivating learners to aspire to take up higher level skills. **Highlights:** Program impact on learners and mentors, launching an outreach program, trust campaign launch, developing organisational evaluation systems (particularly data collection tools), digitisation of organisational processes.

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**The Place: Charlestown Community Centre**

**The program:** The Place: Charlestown Community Centre is located in Charlestown Square Shopping Centre, Lake Macquarie, approximately 10 minutes South of Newcastle NSW. The Place offers a multi-faceted digital mentoring program that includes the provision of basic training drawing on Be Connected and a follow-up technology support social group. The Place supports other organisations to build capacity to develop independent digital mentoring programs. The Place also hosts promotional events.

While most participants who attend the training at the Centre reside within a 30-minute transport catchment, the organisations The Place works with span the entire region. Generally, each Centre training session is attended by 10-15 participants and the social group numbers vary. Basic training is facilitated by a lead facilitator who is employed by the organisation and two volunteer mentors who are paid a stipend.

**Recruiting digital mentors:** Recruitment of digital mentors has been facilitated using the Hunter Volunteer Centre as well as the organisation’s own networks. The Place has an active community network, so word of mouth is an effective recruitment mechanism.
**Working with learners:** The Place uses structured learning based on the Be Connected learning resources, particularly the basic training course. Other training materials have been developed for the Social Group, although they still refer to the Be Connected learning portal to reinforce ideas and learning. All training is offered in groups.

The basic training course focuses on building fundamental skills. The program is structured as follows: Introduction to Be Connected and registering as a user (Week 1); learning about the Topic Library and Resources and practice opening, navigating & closing the site using a tablet or laptop/desktop (Absolute Basics lessons) (Week 2); Building user confidence (Getting to know Your Device, and using the topic lessons dependent on the chosen user device type). Learners are taken through the Be Connected site and encouraged to follow the facilitator on their own devices (Week 3).

When participants are signed into the Be Connected portal, learning activity is recorded. Otherwise, the organisation records attendance at each session and can track learning by matching this to the topic covered in each session.

**Training mentors:** Digital mentors are provided with full training on the particular training modules used, as well as through information and discussion around effective facilitation methods. The Place ran an initial 4-hour training workshop and has followed this up with feedback meetings and in-house presentation skills training.

**Changes over time:** The core training structure offered by The Place has not changed since the program began. The Place still believes building basic skills is an important starting point. However, the content has been adapted to include more real-world examples and practical exercises. One recent adaptation is the addition of a one-on-one time slot for each learner in the last session to access clearer feedback on what has been learned and to re-enforce learnings.

**Key Challenges and Highlights:**

**Challenges:** Getting other organisations who are interested in becoming network partners to cement this relationship.

**Highlights:** The overall impact of the program on the lives of participants. Helping people connect with loved ones, and be more empowered and more independent. Seeing ‘the lights go on’ when participants understand new concepts. Mostly, though, the thanks and the hugs.
**inDigiMOB**

*The program:* The inDigiMOB program aims to improve digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote Northern Territory communities. The program is currently working in 20 NT locations. To date, it has had 2,000 unique participants (engaged in 8,500 ‘participations’), and employed almost 100 Indigenous Digital Mentors.

*Recruiting digital mentors:* Digital mentors are typically recruited through remote community partner organisations. They are either known to the organisation or are identified and approached during digital workshops/activities.

*Working with learners:* Learners participate in hands-on digital workshops/activities that are usually facilitated by a digital access worker with learning support from at least one Indigenous digital mentor. The topics covered in the workshops/activities are typically participant-directed. Participants primarily learn basic IT and mobile phone skills, and also multimedia creation skills. The type of learning is recorded for each workshop/activity, along with participant numbers and demographic data.

*Training mentors:* Digital mentors begin by working alongside partner organisation digital access workers so they receive on-the-job training. Digital mentors also come together a few times a year to network and undergo intensive digital mentor training.

*Changes over time:* The program began as a drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) training model delivered in a few locations. This has changed to an ‘embedded’ partner model where possible, which is supplemented by ‘targeted’ (DIDO) workshops. The organisation initially had difficulty recruiting and employing digital mentors. This has been successfully addressed with inDigiMOB and its partners now offering a variety of flexible employment options. The program was initially focused on basic IT and mobile phone skills to get people
interested in technology and demonstrate some of the possible uses that were appropriate to remote Indigenous communities. Recently, there has been a lot more interest in workshops about Cyber Safety and scam awareness.

**Key Challenges and Highlights:**

**Challenges:** Working with small remote community organisations where the team is reliant on the commitment and dedication of a few key partner employees; creating appropriate and effective training resources in a rapidly changing environment; and continuity of funding.

**Highlights:** Engaging effectively with remote community partner organisations to employ almost 100 digital mentors and improve their digital skills, confidence and knowledge. Having a number of the digital mentors present their projects at the Broadband for the Bush Indigenous Focus Day in the past two years and seeing some of the digital mentors being valued by other organisations who approach them to help run workshops or present at conferences.

**Good Things Foundation**

**The program:** Good Things Foundation manages the national Be Connected Network. The Network consists of more than 2,000 community organisations that provide digital literacy support to older Australians. With the help of its 5,000 digital mentors (a combination of paid staff and volunteers), the Network has supported over 100,000 people to learn digital skills by the Network. Good Things Foundation supports the Network with grant funding, training and professional development, a dedicated support team and online resources. It also runs the international digital inclusion campaign, *Get Online Week*, in which local organisations host events to spread the word in their communities.
about the benefits of getting online and learning new digital skills.

**Recruiting digital mentors:** Each organisation in the Network recruits their own digital mentors, which may include paid staff or volunteers from their community.

**Working with learners:** Organisations in the Network use a variety of face-to-face delivery methods, including blended learning approaches, one-to-one support and group sessions. Online learning resources are available to support digital mentors to deliver this support. The Be Connected program assists older Australians to learn basic digital skills such as how to access the internet, keep in touch with others and stay safe online. Organisations in the Network are able to adapt this content to make it relevant to their needs. This learning can be recorded on the Be Connected websites to assist organisations to keep track of where their learners are up to.

**Training mentors:** Good Things Foundation provides training and support for digital mentors in our Network through regular webinars, events, downloadable guides (including session plans and marketing materials), and an online course hosted on the Be Connected Learning Portal. From mid-2019, digital mentors will also be able to access face-to-face training and support in their community through the network of funded Capacity Building organisations using Good Things Foundation resources.

**Changes over time:** The Be Connected Network has grown to over 2,000 community organisations in under 2 years, and the support provided to these organisations has changed over that time. Good Things Foundation listens carefully to the Network, and works in partnership to develop Be Connected to meet the needs of participating organisations. This has included new grant offerings, introducing the *Get Online Week* campaign to Australia in 2018 and diversifying its webinar topics.

**Key Challenges and Highlights:**

**Challenges:** Managing a large national network from a base in Sydney can be challenging. The Be Connected team may never be able to visit every participating organisation in person, even though it would like to. What can be done is to use digital technology to overcome some of those barriers, which is why Good Things Foundation offers so much support by phone, email and online. **Highlights:** Reaching 2,000 Network Partners in 2018 was a big highlight—that’s over 2,000 locations where people can find free local, friendly support to build their digital skills and confidence!
Design Workshops: Improving our strategies

Strategic design firm Designit facilitated three interactive workshops during the forum. Each was designed to address a unique theme. The three themes were:

1. How do we motivate learners to learn a broad range of skills?
2. How do we recruit mentors?
3. How do we train & retain mentors?

Through a staged interactive design process, small groups articulated problems and design solutions around the respective themes. Each workshop generated a range of problems and solutions, focusing on achievable steps that could be implemented immediately.

The design process was a learning experience for most participants, helping to articulate the obstacles to improving digital mentoring models, but also identifying specific strategies for resolving them in each participant’s context.

As well as generating concrete strategies for improving digital mentoring practice, participants saw the design process as something they could take back to their organisations and apply to develop new approaches to mentoring.
Lessons from the day

For those involved in digital inclusion work and digital literacy training, the attention is always on the learner. So, it is no surprise that forum participants spoke passionately and with a wealth of collective experience about the challenges that learners face and how best to address them.

This summary is drawn from discussions throughout the day, as well as feedback provided in a post-forum survey that asked: *What was the most important message you took from the day?*

Participants’ input

Participant responses to the forum spoke to a number of key themes.

There was overwhelming and consistent expression of a shared or “common cause” in improving digital inclusion through digital mentoring practices: “we are all facing the same issues”, “we’re not alone”, we are “working toward a common goal”.

Nevertheless, there was also consensus that more collaboration is needed: “There are many people and organisations working in this space, and we can magnify impact by working together”, “It’s a joint venture for all NGOs and government services” even if “one size does not fit all”.

Many participants emphasised the valuable role of digital mentors, and insisted on the need to continue “to advocate for the use for local digital mentors and the valuing of these roles”, and the further “development of digital mentoring as a skillset”.

Recruitment and training of mentors was seen as important. There was a strong sense of the need for “more mentors with competent skills to help seniors”, that some “mentors need (re)motivating”, ongoing training, and acknowledgement for the important work they do.

Digital mentors are not new. They are well established under a number of names. For example, for 21 years ASCCA has been using peer learning strategies in friendly, non-threatening environments, and has invested around one million volunteer hours into helping older adults become digitally literate.

The need for funding was also a consistent point of focus: “All groups seem to have similar problems with limited financial resources.” This issue was acknowledged throughout the day and via the survey. It was spoken about in terms of ways to better support and enable digital mentor programs to grow and thrive. Flexibility in grant guidelines was seen as important and overall, “a
more coordinated funding approach” is needed to streamline processes.

Some additional insights generated out of discussions, panels, questions and responses and workshops throughout the day include:

The one-on-one approach that many mentors adopt is a response to many of the challenges in delivering digital inclusion support and developing learners’ digital literacies. The strength of one-on-one mentoring is its ability to address individual needs, particularly as these needs change over time.

A Help Desk is an important backup to group workshops, and this is about having multiple opportunities for helping learners to engage in digital literacy activities, and tailored support.

For mentors, personality and skills are both essential. Adaptability is also vital for mentors, who need to address the varied issues and needs of learners. This often involves ensuring an individualised ‘interest-oriented’ approach is taken.

Keeping it social is often the key to working with volunteer mentors, as well
as engaging effectively with learners. In fact, many consider social connection to be central digital mentoring outcomes (abundant cake, tea and coffee are useful; and “thanks” or appreciation for mentors goes a long way). Social inclusion should be seen as a core goal, not an add-on to skills training.

Similarly, creating an environment of shared expertise and experience is important, because nobody knows or is expected to know everything about computers and other digital devices.

Digital mentoring programs work best when embedded within communities, providing safe and welcoming spaces. This allows for relationships to be leveraged and developed, and trust to be established and maintained. This was essential, for instance, in the success of the remote Indigenous programs developed by inDigiMOB.

Community engagement and technical support is about enabling informed choices, improved skills and knowledge. Things work when independence is developed and fostered. The most consistent message throughout the day was that professional sharing is essential. Developing strong communities of practice among those who provide support will improve digital inclusion, skills and literacy for all.

### Ongoing challenges

Forum participants raised a number of challenges that organisations face when offering digital mentoring and digital mentors.

Firstly, there is a recognised need to be clear about who mentors are, what they do, their characteristics, qualities and “qualifications” or skillsets, and the boundaries that need to be established between mentors and learners. This needs to be established up front and reinforced regularly through development and social activities.

The support systems around mentors are important. Questions raised in relation to this issue include: How can organisations holistically support mentors while not overloading them or over-relying on voluntary work? What are the best systems to find, manage and support volunteers (the difficulties of recruitment)? How can organisation best keep mentors up to date with new technologies; and what is the best way to approach pairing mentors with learners.

Continuous and rapid technological change also presents a challenge. For some organisations, at times, motivating mentors to upskill can be a challenge. Following major changes, for instance, to operating systems or devices,
mentors unwilling to adapt often shift out of the role.

Managing learners’ and mentors’ time restrictions and commitments, as well as distances they may need to cover, and other logistical life conditions present considerable challenges. Backup support for mentors is often needed when they don’t have solutions.

Dealing with the complex social, health and cultural circumstances of learners also presents an ongoing challenge: ageism, along with disability has an unrecognised complicating impact. This can be difficult for even the best digital mentors to address. Access to specialists in assistive technology can be especially important for working with seniors who are not only trying to improve digital skills and participation, but are also often dealing with health-related disabilities such as diminishing motor skills, hearing or eyesight.

Context matters for mentoring. This includes not just language barriers and cultural differences, but also the platforms, devices, and online activities learners need to engage with. For instance, elderly Chinese immigrants, may have particular language challenges and cultural barriers to overcome while developing digital skills, but also may need assistance with Chinese-specific platforms like WeChat, Weibo, or Youku Tudou.

Similarly, working with remote Aboriginal communities requires local knowledge, language and cultural sensitivity often missing in standardised online resources and programs. There was acknowledgement that rigid systems, funding, programs and resources don’t always work.

The sustainability of all the community organisations that undertake digital inclusion work, and manage digital mentors, has to be carefully considered, and included in national policy frameworks and local strategies.

Volunteering is not self-sustaining. Organisations that incorporate volunteer digital mentors into their digital inclusion work have to advertise, keep up communications, recruit, train, and manage mentors in compliance and accordance with volunteer regulations and best practice.
Recommendations:

Recommendations derived from the panels, Q&A sessions, group discussion, and workshops throughout the forum cover a wide territory. The forum’s organising committee has distilled the following five key recommendations for how to enhance the effectiveness of digital mentors and thus improve digital participation for all Australians.

1. **Invest nationally and locally in raising awareness about the importance of digital inclusion for all Australians.**

   Get Online Week provides just one opportunity to have conversations about the importance of digital skills, literacy and participation, and how to make this happen, and there are many others such as Stay Smart Online Week. Other outreach and awareness raising efforts are needed.

   Despite the rapid migration of services, information, and communication online, not everyone sees the benefit of developing digital skills. Awareness remains vital for bridging digital divides. A new public campaign should be developed and funded by government, based on research and drawing on expertise in the not-for-profit sector to inspire Australians to want to get online.

2. **Extend research to understand the key barriers to digital inclusion and participation, and develop best practice approaches to effective digital mentoring.**

   Key challenges in this area include finding more effective ways to define and measure digital competencies, skills and participation for all members of society. The connections between social inclusion, wellbeing and participation in the digital economy are increasingly well known and well researched.

   There is a gap in our knowledge about the benefits that peer and volunteer digital mentors can generate. There is a need for developing effective metrics: understanding the baseline of where we are so we can measure change. Also needed is a better understanding of the learner’s journey as they attempt to get online and engage with digital technologies.

   Just as peer workers in community health, for instance, have been bolstered by evidence-based practice, digital mentors can be better researched for their contribution to improving digital inclusion, especially for those who are most reluctant and digitally disconnected. Research is needed to understand the barriers to getting
online among those most disconnected.

3. **Inject new funding into programs that offer long-term digital mentoring and ensure their sustainability, visibility and availability for all who need them.**

   Australia’s aging population, along with the rapid technological developments affecting workers in digitally transforming industries, means the need for digital literacy support will only grow. A mix of flat and deep localized investment that embeds new funding structures at the local level alongside national funding will help to account for local and community-specific needs.

   Local Government plays a big part and needs to play a bigger one. Increased funding should support the creation and running of digital mentoring hubs throughout Australia that factors in the cost of recruiting, training and managing volunteers and ensures the sustainability of programs.

4. **Promote coordination and collaboration among organisations that support digital mentors, to avoid competitive practices.**

   Much of the good work in building and delivering digital mentor programs has been achieved by a wide range of community organisations and networks aiming to support specific groups, whether seniors, Indigenous, CALD communities or others. Technology companies, and digital providers (telecommunications and internet service providers) can also play a greater role in supporting the non-profit and research communities that are working to address digital inequalities through digital mentor programs and other means. Working together will always achieve more than the individual parts alone.

5. **Innovate to improve ICT access, and through funding mechanisms that position digital mentoring as an essential social service, as these can go a long way improving digital skills and participation.**

   For instance, free WiFi in aged care facilities can make a big difference to digital inclusion for seniors; and adjustment to aged care assessment through ACAT homecare could help to expand the work of digital mentors in supporting the wellbeing and social inclusion of older Australians. The cost of the internet, and even the complexity of getting or staying connected with broadband or mobile plans remains a barrier for many, one that mentors can be well placed to help address.
Endnotes


