

Jobs and Family Relations: Use of Computers and Mobile Phones Among Hispanic Day Laborers in Seattle

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a research project on the use of computers and mobile phones by Hispanic day laborers at Casa Latina, a non-profit organization in Seattle, Washington. Drawing from over 100 interviews, participatory observations and a focus group, we found that information and communication technologies (ICT) help immigrant day laborers to remain connected with their families and their employers. Mobile phones complement but do not replace the use of computers: mobile phones are used primarily to obtain jobs, while computers and the Internet are used mostly to communicate with family and friends. The results of this study offer new insight regarding the way day laborers use ICT to facilitate their navigation and integration into society as immigrants with precarious existences in the US. This study can also inform programs to help provide better support services and training that can effectively meet the needs of these extremely underserved populations.

Keywords: immigrants, day labor, information literacy

Introduction

The US is an industrialized country with high penetration and use of information and communication technologies (ICT). For example, broadband internet reached two thirds of the adult population in the country in 2010, according to Pew Research Center, and cell phones were owned by 88% of American adults in 2012 (Smith, 2010; Smith, 2012). The city of Seattle can be easily regarded as a high-tech city, famous for the presence of Microsoft, Amazon, Boeing and Nintendo among other technology firms. For many in Seattle, life is technology-saturated, and navigating popular culture and public governance requires familiarity with technology tools such as computers and the internet. Not everyone in Seattle is employed in high-tech fields, however, and many of these technological outliers are poor. In 2009, 14% of the population in Seattle lived on an income below the poverty line, and in 2007, 23% of Seattle households reported no Internet usage at home ("Poverty Rate Data," 2012; CCG Consulting, 2007).

The majority of the poor in Seattle are either American Indian or Alaska Native (29%), Black or African American (21%), or Hispanic or Latino (13%) ("Poverty Rate Data," 2012). Among the poor in Seattle is a large population of day laborers, most of whom are of Hispanic origin and living in precarious conditions. Many have undependable jobs, low pay, no benefits or health insurance, and live in a state of uncertain immigration status with the looming risk of deportation. According to Valenzuela, Theodore, Meléndez, and González (2006), there are an estimated 117,000 day laborers seeking work on any given day in the US, with an estimated 3,000 located in Seattle. Day laborers most often work in gardening and construction, or as painters, roofers and housecleaners. Their employers are usually either individual homeowners or construction contractors. Immigrant day laborers generally have little formal education and limited English language skills. Employment, when it is available, is often low in pay and of short or uncertain duration; Valenzuela et al. (2006) noted that day laborers rarely make even 15,000 dollars a year, keeping them well below the federal poverty threshold.

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Day laborers are a marginalized population vulnerable to abuse by employers (Valenzuela et al., 2006). Day laborers have found some support in the form of day laborer advocacy centers, now existing in 15 states in the US. One of them is Casa Latina (2012), founded in Seattle, WA in 1994 "to empower Latino immigrants through educational and economic opportunities;" last year, Casa Latina had over 350 active members, dispatched more than 4600 jobs and helped more than 60 of its members to obtain permanent employment. Casa Latina is an active member of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) and other organizations that work to improve the living conditions of immigrant day laborers in the US.

This paper explores the experiences of technology use among some of the poorest and most under-served sectors of American society. In particular, we analyze the use of mobile phones and computers among Hispanic day laborers in Seattle. We seek to offer a more in-depth understanding of the way these extremely marginalized sectors of the population use information technologies to meet their everyday needs. The immigrants we interviewed tend to consider their present situation in Seattle as a transitional period, and many intend to return to their home country after achieving some kind of success in the USA. Day laborers place great importance on mobile phones and computers as tools. They view these items as tools that enable not only survival and adjustment to the challenging situations and environments they are facing in this city and country, but also as devices that will allow them to succeed in realizing the ambitions that enabled their journeys to leave their countries of origin in search of a better future.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: we first discuss some of the relevant literature regarding immigrants and day laborers, and the use of ICT among marginalized and underserved communities. We then briefly present the research methods employed in this study, followed by a detailed description and discussion of the findings and their implications. The findings include an analysis of the demographic trends among day laborers and their use of ICT, as well as brief narrative descriptions of the experiences of individual day laborers. Their experiences are then analyzed in regard to their use of computers and mobile phones. Finally, we conclude with pointers for future research in this area of inquiry.

Literature Review

This study operates in an interdisciplinary field of information science frequently associated with the "digital divide," "digital inclusion" or with Information and Communication Technologies for Development "ICTD or ICT4D," applied to the context of poor immigrants in the US. In a recent examination tracing the evolution of the literature on digital divide, Nemer (2012) remarks that bridging the digital divide will mean much more than just providing neutral access to technology. He states that digital inclusion concerns the concept of an "equal access to public space" as an "essential condition for citizenship." Access to technology alone is not enough: effective use of ICT in ways that help people meet their information needs and improve their quality of life is essential (Gurstein, 2008).

Ono and Zavodny (2008) studied the extent and causes of inequalities in information technology ownership and use between natives and immigrants in the United States. They showed that assessing digital inequality between immigrants and native inhabitants is important not only because of the significant influence of IT access and skills on employment, educational opportunities and civic engagement, but also because many immigrants - particularly those from Latin America - are disadvantaged relative to those born in the United States. Additionally, Ono and Zavodny (2008) pointed out that ICT skills are crucial to success in the workplace and at school, and that such technical skills play a vital role in civic and political engagement. Furthermore, using data from the Computer and Internet Use Supplement to the October 2003 Current Population Survey (CPS), Fairlie (2007) found that large disparities in home computer and Internet access exist across major racial groups, and that Spanish-speaking Latinos have strikingly low rates of computer ownership and home Internet access. In a study on the gender digital divide in the use of mobile phones in a small community of Latino immigrant farm workers in Southeast Ohio, Garcia (2011) suggests that mobile phones are not inherently empowering to women, and under specific circumstances such as undocumented migration, they can serve as a device that strengthens hierarchical power relations between women and men. However, more in line with our findings, Landry and Kuglitsch (2009) found that a community center that provided ICT access and education to women in Yakima, WA was immensely empowering for the women and their families and

sometimes just “breaking the fear” of turning on a computer is a huge step that should not be underestimated.

The concept of the “embeddedness” of ICT in the daily life of transnational migrants is a rich area of study encompassing studies in communication, development, linguistics, information behavior and other fields. One aspect of this embeddedness focuses on ICT use by immigrants to retain contact and connection with their country of origin. Vertovec (2004) observed that for migrants “transnational connectivity through cheap telephone calls is at the heart of their lives.” He examined the use of both mobile phones and international calling cards and the impact they have on immigrants and their families. Even though a telephone call can’t do everything, it can intensify and ease communication over long distances, and has benefits for those on either end of the line. Leonardi (2003) found that Latinos in the US prefer cell phones to the Internet for interpersonal contact. Participants in his study “did not view computers and the internet as technologies that helped keep people connected.” Benitez studied Salvadoran immigrants in Washington DC and their use of the internet, and found that though the community had limited access, they perceived the internet as a useful tool for family communication (Benitez, 2006).

Some studies explore the use of ICT as a contextualizing tool for societal integration and inclusion amongst migrant populations, either in conjunction with ICT use for contacting their home country, or as a distinct phenomenon. An examination of the literature suggests that the information behavior of immigrants has to take both of these perspectives in hand: “migrants therefore exist in a world of ‘in-betweenness,’ negotiating cultural forms and identities at the crossroads of the nation-state and global diasporas” (Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007). Burell & Anderson (2008) particularly explored ICT use among Ghanaians abroad and found their use of these technologies cultivated a connection to the homeland as well as a window into the society they navigated on a daily basis, and to the currents of a wider world. While studying new migrants to New Zealand, researchers found that access to email and the Internet “enabled migrants to make sense of their immigration/adaptation experience, as well as manage daily living” (Holmes & Janson, 2008, p. 51). We discuss elsewhere the emotional barriers faced by Hispanic day laborers to learn basic computer skills (Gomez et.al., 2013).

Operating in this context, we set out to examine how and why the workers at Casa Latina used ICT, their fears and barriers to use, and their motivations and desires. Living within the context of a high-tech city like Seattle, but leading lives that are threatened by day-to-day basic survival needs, what importance does ICT have for this population and how do they use and perceive it? We wish to let the emergent data, and most importantly, the immigrants themselves, speak.

Research Methods

This study explored the uses and perceptions surrounding ICT among day laborers affiliated with Casa Latina, a social service agency in Seattle, WA. Casa Latina had around 400 active members at the time of the study, of which about 75% were men. Between March and June 2012 we conducted structured interviews with 94 day laborers, a focus group with six volunteer leaders, participatory observations of nine introductory computer classes, and six in-depth interviews with trainees in the introductory computer classes, in compliance with University of Washington Human Subjects Division guidelines and procedures. All data was collected in Spanish by native or near-native Spanish speakers.

We conducted in-depth interviews with six day laborers who were attending English classes at Casa Latina. We spoke with three women and three men between the ages of 24 and 62. The interviews focused on their daily routines and the way in which phones and computers were embedded in their lives. We also attended and observed nine computer classes over the course of more than two months.

Representing about 25% of the total members, the 94 structured interviews offer a broad and representative sample of the opinions of day laborers affiliated with Casa Latina. The focus groups, observations and in-depth interviews, on the other hand, offer a deep and rich understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the workers in relation to the topics studied. The combination of both breadth and depth in the data collection enhances the trustworthiness of the findings. An iterative process of analysis inspired by grounded theory was used to elicit emerging themes and trends, which were discussed and probed further among members of the research team, comprised of graduate students under the supervision of a faculty member of the Information School.

Findings: Uses and Users of ICT

According to the survey data, about 75% of the members of Casa Latina are male, and the majority of the workers are between the ages of 41-50. Most originally come from Mexico and Central America (notably Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador); workers from more than ten countries were included in our survey. Almost half of the workers arrived in the US during the last decade, nearly a quarter arrived during both the 1980s and 90s, and very few came before that. The majority of respondents have attended either elementary or high school and about 10% have attended college. The workers' job types are highly gender-segregated: men work in gardening, landscaping and construction, and women in house cleaning and, occasionally, child-care.

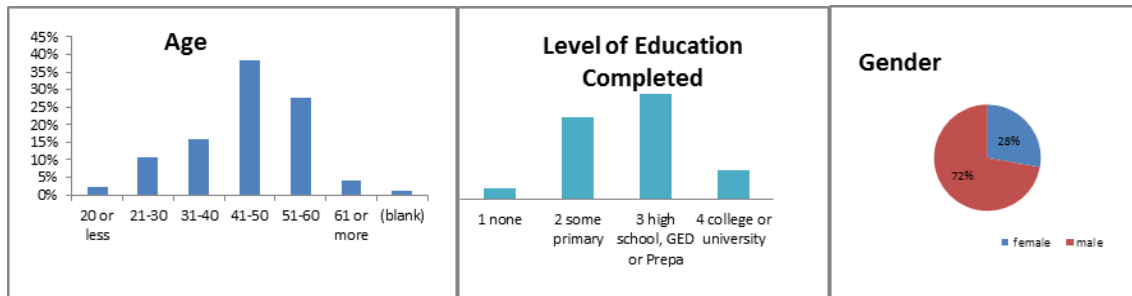


Figure 1-3. Characteristics of Day Laborers

Personal computers (PCs) are used by 67% of the day laborers, though most of them do not own a computer. Most day laborers use shared, public computers at libraries or other public spaces (Casa Latina just recently started to offer limited computer access and basic training). Computers are owned by 39% of the workers or their families, and they are used to connect to the internet either at home (dialup, wireless, broadband) or in public places where Wi-Fi is available (such as a public library or coffee shop/store). Shared computers are available in public places such as libraries, community centers, schools, and even technology stores (some workers noted that they go to the Apple Store or other technology stores to use the computers located there). Finally, in the case of mobile phones, we paid particular attention to the uses of internet-enabled phones (smart phones), which can have data plans with the wireless carrier, or allow their user to connect to public Wi-Fi. Use and ownership of technology tools is summarized in Figure 4.

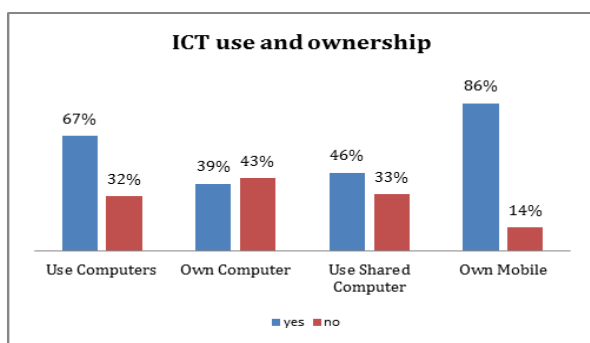


Figure 4. ICT Use and Ownership

Almost half of the participants of the computers classes mentioned that they spend the majority of their time either at home or at a job site, or commuting between the two. The workers have very limited time and resources to get to know, use, and enjoy other places and facilities in the city. Their lives revolve around their homes, jobs and securing food and clothing. Casa Latina is always mentioned as an important reference of their daily life. The survey shows that while 79% of the members go to Casa Latina primarily to seek jobs, only 47% of the members place the highest value of their membership on the jobs they get dispatched: training opportunities are the most important benefit for 27% of the members we

interviewed, while meeting others and building trust are considered most important for 11% and 10% respectively.

Four Experiences of ICT Use

This section introduces four Hispanic day laborers at Casa Latina. In order to maintain authenticity in these narratives, we have decided to retain the uniqueness of actual personal stories, rather than to create fictional characters with aggregated characteristics. The four narratives tend to epitomize salient common patterns in the experiences and uses of communication technologies among the day laborers in our study. The names and other details have been changed to protect their identities.

Betty does not expect to stay in the USA. She uses her basic phone to interact with her employers, using her rudimentary English skills to communicate with them. Because she spends the majority of her time between work and home and has no relatives living nearby, she does not have local social networks of support. Computers offer her a chance to see and be in touch with her family. This technology provides Betty with emotional support, a space for interacting with trustworthy people and the possibility to share immediate daily life with her family.

Adiana feels that she has already accomplished the goals she made when coming to the USA. Even though she would like to stay here, she is considering going back to Mexico to be in charge of her aging mother's care. Her phone and use of public computers are seen as economic tools, as they help her to find work and maintain a certain level of social life in the United States. Her basic mobile phone allows her to be located by possible employers and a few members of her family. Access to computers also allows her to look for jobs and send in applications via email.

Orlando wants to have a good life here in Seattle, and to be able to maximize his time in the pursuit of this goal. He uses text messages to be sure of the locations and specifics of his jobs. Shared computers give him the latest news on his country of origin. He also thinks that computers can provide him with the information and education necessary to be a better gardener. His occasional phone calls let him not only keep in touch with distant family and friends but also allow him to be in touch with local social networks.

Rafael would not like to stay in the USA. His phone allows him to contact his family, and also to communicate with his grandmother in Guatemala, who provides him with news regarding his old neighborhood. The phone is also his conduit for employment as a day laborer. Learning to use computers gets him one step closer to his dream of designing gardens and supporting a landscaping business. He already has philanthropic plans for the profits from this business; he wants to help fund educational opportunities for young people.

Discussion: The Immigrant Day Laborers' Experiences of ICT

Our research shows that mobile phones and computers not only provide different methods of societal integration for day laborers in Seattle, but they also affect relationships with their countries of origin. These tools have different meanings and uses; not only do they support physical and material needs (e.g. communication, jobs), they also support emotional and symbolic needs, such as trust, intimacy and empowerment. Moreover, the "embeddedness" of ICT tools within their daily lives is oriented by personal beliefs and aspirations, as well as cultural values. These results give a more complex picture of the immigration processes, and a more nuanced look into the ways that phones and computers are embedded into the daily lives of day laborers.

Mobile Phone Use

Phones represent the most accessible and manageable tool for the majority of the day laborers consulted. According to the survey data, 86% of the day laborers we interviewed and 100% of the women own a cell phone. Only 25% of mobile phone users connect to the internet through their device, though if they do use this feature, most report using it every day. The data of the survey also shows that older members of the group use internet on cell phones for maps, weather, email and info searches/browsing; in addition, younger people use email, Facebook, and YouTube. Younger members of this group, especially men, are more familiar with phones than computers; they consider them easier to operate and useful for social interaction.

"It is useful because the mobile phone puts food on the table" male (44) day laborer from Guatemala
"The phone is the basis of my work. If I don't load minutes, I feel that I may not do anything."
 Female (29) from Mexico

Phones provide them with the possibility to easily interact with employers and to better agree to the terms and conditions of their work. The survey also shows that the strongest benefit of owning a cell phone is the ability to be called by prospective employers. Even though day laborers have to be present at Casa Latina to be dispatched to a job site (there is a raffle in the morning and jobs are assigned from a list of job requests from employers), repeat employment by previous employers is possible and encouraged: having a cell phone where an employer can reach the worker and to make a new contract is indispensable, according to most of our respondents. Even though only 43% of the workers use text messages (SMS) on a daily basis, many of them stated that this tool has provided them with a more agile and effective tool to interact with their employers. The non-synchronous communication allowed by texting gives the workers time to translate their employers' messages without stress and without "letting on" that they do not understand what is being said. Many interviewees thought that becoming too dependent on a mobile phone was a big risk, but interestingly almost no one considered privacy issues or the possibility of being tracked or located as a risk related to the use of a mobile phone.

Computer Use

"It has being more than 7 years without seeing them... I haven't seen my children since I left them". Computer class student.
"Before I was only able to talk on the phone, now I can see my family and it is like I have them very close. It is a very different experience." Female (43) day laborer from Honduras

According to the survey, computers are less frequently used, and even less frequently owned than mobile phones. While 67% of respondents use computers, only 39% own one, and 46% use a shared computer, mostly at the public library (69% of users of shared computers use them at the library). The qualitative information collected from day laborers shows that the group that owns computers mainly uses them to stay in regular communication with family and friends in their countries of origin--especially through Skype and Facebook. For many of our respondents it is very important to see distant family, to feel closer to them and share daily life experiences, as well as to feel involved in their home country and its issues. Betty, our case study example, is exemplary of the trend.

Many of the workers who attend the computer classes at Casa Latina mentioned that the possibility of seeing and interacting on a regular basis with their distant families has encouraged them to learn to use computers. Visual communication through a service like Skype adds a new dimension to the experience, as they "can perceive other things" through non-verbal cues. In turn their families can also perceive a more complete picture of life in the United States. Visual communication is a personal and intimate activity. It can help explain why the use of shared computers for communication with family and friends is not prevalent and why shared computer users are more concerned with privacy risks, such as people accessing, observing or stealing their information, passwords and identities.

More day laborers use shared computers than own one. The majority of the workers use the computer to look for information regarding international issues and the economic and political situation of their countries of origin, as well as for searching on topics related to their jobs and to personal interests. To a lesser degree, they also expressed that they use shared computers as a source of entertainment, especially to listen to music and to facilitate such hobbies as cooking, sports or even health and beauty.

For this group, the access to computers is related to the idea of progress, and becoming part of a modern society and a more interconnected world. This perception has been reported among users of shared computers in Latin America as well (Gomez, 2012). Frequently during the computer classes, the workers characterized people who know how to use computers as smart, and they noted that those who are able to work and also make money through the use of computers as even more intelligent.

Due to time constrains, many day laborers indicated they are more efficient when using shared computers, especially when they are looking at information about jobs, the second most important use of shared computers in the survey at 33%. During the participatory observations, women in particular

expressed concern about having enough time to go to the library to practice using computers. Many women also mentioned that they have had trouble setting aside time to learn computers at all because of their double burden as both mothers and workers.

The participatory observations showed that men seem to have greater access to spaces where they can share tips and information on use of computers, software and applications with their peers. Many of them mentioned that in their social network there are computer experts who have guided and taught them to solve particular issues.

"We can use it to waste time. Before I would go to the park and play basketball and now I'm only on the computer." Male (50) day laborer from Mexico

The easy access to programs, websites, games with "bad things" and non-constructive information such as porn, prostitution and crime was considered the most negative aspect of computers within the participatory observation group. However, both the groups that owned or shared computers were concerned about the harmful physical effects of computers, notably eyestrain.

Conclusion

While day laborers represent one of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations amongst immigrants in a highly technological city like Seattle, they make extensive use of communication and information technologies. These tools aid them in their integration into the US, as well as help them to maintain ties with social networks near and far. Due to limited economic resources, sociocultural conditions and the difficulties of cross-border travel, mobile phones and notably computers (both owned and shared), provide day laborers the possibility of maintaining a link to the daily life of their far-away families and friends, as well as provide a link to the everyday news and culture of their home towns and countries. Computers also help them be involved in cultural practices and traditions in their home countries (festivals, marriages, celebrations).

Mobile phones are extremely important to day laborers, not only to help them find and keep jobs, but also to negotiate the specifics of these jobs with employers. Especially significant are the uses of mobile phone text messaging, which enable day laborers to have more equal interactions with their employers and empower them as workers. Having a phone allows one to be reachable by employers, and provides access to local social networks, which help to create a strong sense of "connectedness," confidence and safety. Access to and knowledge of computers facilitates local job searches and provides access to information that is not otherwise easily accessible. This expands the educational possibilities of these workers, and offers new avenues for advancement for the silenced and marginalized groups among immigrant day laborers, in particular women.

While the day laborers we consulted are not universally using the most advanced ICT, they are learning, accessing and employing technology that suits their needs. Their use of ICT allows them to face the labor and personal challenges of their everyday lives. These technologies are helping them to cross the borders of time and place, facilitating a sense of belonging and social integration, and especially helping them to integrate into society through employment. The ICT tools that these workers chose fit well with their provisional and uncertain daily lives. Fulfilling both emotional and existential needs, these technologies are also helping them to make their own lives easier and friendlier, and probably accounts for the perception of ICT as crucial tools for survival and success in a modern city such as Seattle.

Approaching day laborers through the lens of their use of technology has also shed light on our understanding of the daily lives of this particular group of workers, and the complexity of the processes of immigration. Their experiences have helped us to better appreciate their work and the sacrifices they make to ensure a better life for their families in the US or in their countries of origin. Their stories challenge commonly held ideas about the kinds of jobs these immigrants perform, and the strategies they adopt to find and to maintain employment. Moreover, their stories reinforce the idea that immigration is not an individual experience affecting the life of just one person; instead it is a phenomenon that implicates families and whole social networks of local, regional and national communities.

This research has evidenced that mobile phones are not replacing computers as a source of information and entertainment, but that they complement each other in unique ways. Also, we found strong links between ICT use and two related communication practices which are perceived on the same

plane by the day laborers: the development of English language skills and the arrangement of transportation (by bus or by car). Future research can explore these connections further.

A better understanding of the way ICT assists the everyday lives of day laborers can help tailor training programs for immigrant populations in a way that takes into consideration their constraints, their needs, and the emotional barriers they face when making use of technology tools. Moreover many avenues for further research and analysis were identified through this study. For example, the relationships between ICT and the processes of sociocultural integration of immigrants, the role of ICT for the complex and fluid processes of building citizenship as part of the contemporary immigration phenomena, and the importance of ICT for other labor experiences and communities of immigrants, could stimulate new dimensions and studies within the information and immigration fields.

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