Digital Tech, Migration and Learning for Work: The Janus Effect in Times of Crisis

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Summary

The use of digital technologies has both positive and negative implications for the lives of migrants. If migrants are indeed to use digital tech to learn, train and work throughout the education–training–work continuum, then policies need to be introduced at the heart of digital tech that explicitly seek to mitigate the increased inequalities to which they give rise and foster equity.

Keywords

Migrants
Digital tech
Inequality
Equity
Learning

Context: The Janus Effect in Times of Crisis

Two-faced Janus was the ancient Roman god of beginnings and ends, of duality, of gates and transitions, of passages and frames (Porter, 2019). He thus represents many dimensions of both migration and the education–training–work continuum: beginnings and ends, the importance of gates and gatekeepers, the life transitions involved, the passages of migration and learning and the frames or contexts within which migrants experience their learning and working lives. However, Janus's fundamental duality also represents an essential aspect of how digital technologies are themselves used at all stages of the education-training-work continuum: to do good, or to do harm.

Digital tech has been widely promoted as a "solution" to many of the world's problems, and especially to providing appropriate education and training for work. For migrants and refugees, it is promoted as a means through which they can maintain contact with families and friends, gain employment, send money home more easily and share their identities and qualifications with potential employers at a distance (McAuliffe, 2021). Yet, migrants' uses of digital tech also represent significant risks and can cause very real harms (Farbenblum et al., 2018; Guberek et al., 2018). Digital tech is used to surveil migrants, to deceive them and to abuse and oppress them, and they too can use it to cause such harms to others. This Janus duality of both migration and digital tech is considerably exacerbated during times of crisis, most recently seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

One key to understanding this duality is to recognise that digital technologies are all created and designed with

very specific interests in mind; they also have unintended consequences. It is therefore scarcely surprising that companies work so hard to subvert civil society organisations, the UN system and international agencies into believing that digital tech does indeed represent "the" solution to most of the world's crises. This was particularly so during the COVID-19 pandemic, when much attention was paid to its uses to support education, training and new work patterns that enabled the separation and distancing of people from their former places of learning and working. Moreover, digital tech is likely to be used increasingly in the future to enable many more people who in the past had to travel physically as migrants to new work locations instead to work virtually from their homes.

Migrant Diversity and Uses of Digital Tech for Education, Training and Work

This overview is based in part on our work within the MIDEQ Hub which explores diverse aspects of migration among 12 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America[1], and from which four key issues can be identified (see also International Labour Organization (ILO) and International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2021; McAuliffe, 2021):

- First, migrants are very diverse, and it is not helpful to make too many sweeping generalisations about them. A well-educated migrant with good, recognisable and certified digital skills from one country will have very different employment opportunities than someone from another country who only knows how to use WhatsApp or YouTube.

- Second, it is nevertheless possible to draw some general conclusions about how most migrants, especially the least advantaged, do use digital tech: most only use a limited number of popular apps, very few use any apps designed specifically for migrants, mobile phones dominate and their prime use is for social interaction.

- Third, many migrants aspire to use digital tech for training and learning, for generating income and for commercial activities. However, significant numbers of migrants still do not have the essential skills and awareness to be able to use the technologies that they already have for these purposes. They are thus not well placed to benefit from the potential of digital tech to support a joined-up approach to the Continuum.

- Fourth, migrants are often aware of the dangers of digital tech being used for surveillance purposes, but many (especially women) are still affected by the violence and abuse that are so prevalent in their use. There is therefore an important need for migrants to receive appropriate training in the wise, safe and secure use of digital tech.

Promising Practices

Numerous apps have been developed by international agencies, civil society organisations and companies to support migrants (see MigApp, developed by IOM, and with 10K+ downloads on Google Play; RedSafe, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s digital humanitarian platform with 50K+ downloads on Google Play; and RefAid)[2]. Other, more local, apps include Shuvayatra (developed by the Asia Foundation and partners for Nepali migrant workers, with 50K+ downloads on Google Play) and Apprise (used to uncover labour exploitation in South-East Asia). The numbers of app downloads indicate that they have value to many people, but even 50K represents only 0.018% of the world's 272 million international migrants (2019) (estimated by IOM).

Very few platforms or apps yet specifically address the Continuum needs of migrants within Africa, Asia and Latin America (for examples of digital tech in training for work, though, see Omar Dengo Foundation in Costa Rica, and the GIZ-funded Pro-Educação in Mozambique; see also ILO and IOM, 2020). In part, this is because of a reticence to support the use of digital tech in vocational training programmes more generally (see Comyn & Unwin, 2020). Despite this paucity, the growing international emphasis on life-long and life-wide learning (UNESCO, 2019) gives hope that greater emphasis may be placed in the future on appropriate use of these technologies in providing relevant training for a wide variety of jobs (see UNESCO-UNEVOC TVET in a Digital World, and the UN's 2022 Transforming Education Summit). The useful report by ILO and UNESCO (2020) on the digitalisation of skills systems and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), emphasises that as the use of digital tech becomes more and more pervasive, it will undoubtedly be used much more widely for TVET. One of the most important ways that digital tech can be used to blend the sectors of the Continuum is by providing mutually acceptable and secure qualification and certification systems for migrants that can be recognised across different contexts.

There nevertheless remains a danger that migrants will still be left out of these more formal programmes, especially in crisis situations where governments tend to focus more on their own citizens than they do on immigrants. To some extent, the informal nature of much of the content available on digital platforms may help to mitigate this problem. YouTube is thus probably the biggest global platform for informal skills training, and even more people turned to it for training during COVID-19 as they sought additional skills to solve the new problems that they were facing. Migrants who have sufficient access and basic digital skills and can afford the connectivity charges are readily able to avail themselves of such resources.

A further avenue for effective digital training across all the Continuum sectors is illustrated by the activities of those employers who see it in their self-interest to provide migrant employees with the skills and education to be able to do online training related to their work. Some companies in Malaysia, for example, who employ large numbers of migrant labourers from Nepal, specifically sought to upgrade their workforce through the use of digital tech during the COVID-19 crisis. Even if this upgrading is motivated by self-interest, it does provide migrants with both generic and task specific digital skills that can be put to good use subsequently for work.

Policy Implications

Four broad conclusions seem appropriate:

- First, digital tech can be used anywhere and at any time, but only as long as users have access, can afford it and know how to use it. If these conditions are met, migrants can benefit considerably across the education-training-work continuum.

- Second, the acquisition of basic digital skills is becoming increasingly essential for many types of employment, and thus it is important for migrants to gain such skills before seeking work overseas.

- Third, online specialised and formal skills training can be extremely valuable for those who can afford it. However, informal alternatives, such as those available through YouTube, also provide valuable sources of training (as well as other aspects of education) for migrants. Care must be taken not to waste resources on developing new content and training where relevant material is already available.

- Fourth, and looking to the future, the potential of new digital tech must also be anticipated. virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are already becoming important tools in training as well as for entertainment.

Three important policy implications building on these can be recommended. First, it must be appreciated that the oft-espoused equity principle implies that the more marginalised a context is, the more resources will need to be directed to ensure that everyone can benefit along and across the Continuum. Many migration contexts involve marginalised individuals and communities, especially where migration is forced or when refugees are involved. Hence, governments of both sending and host countries must allocate additional resources should they wish to deliver such services (including education) equitably to everyone living in their territories.

Second, the most important thing that can be done to help the most marginalised migrants gain relevant education and training for work is to ensure that they have the basic knowledge and skills to be able to use digital tech appropriately. Many skills can now be obtained freely through the Internet, but only if people have the knowledge and ability to access it. Digital skills training for the most marginalised has been undertaken for at least a quarter of a century, and it is a sad reflection that so many people still remain without it.

Finally, all such support for migrant education, training and work reiterates the importance of safety and security when using digital tech. This is a continuum-wide necessity. While cyber-security should be ensured by the companies creating digital platforms, it is also incumbent on all those working with migrants and digital tech to ensure that migrants have the knowledge and wherewithal to remain safe and secure online. Only then will the Janus-like positives and negatives of digital tech be mediated safely by migrants, at the beginning, in transition and at the end of their journeys as well as across the Continuum.

Endnotes

1. These countries are Brazil, Burkina Faso, Côte D'Ivoire, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Haiti, Jordan, Malaysia, Nepal and South Africa. See https://mideq.org for further information on the overall MIDE Hub, and for our own specific work on technology inequality and migration, see https://ict4d.org.uk/technology-inequality-and-migration/, which facilitates migrants and tech developers crafting digital tech that may reduce migrant inequalities. This research was supported through MIDEQ which is funded by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1]
2. For further examples, see our list at https://ict4d.org.uk/digital-technology-use-by-migrants/

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