

ILLUME

Virtual Focus Group with Utility and Community Leaders on the Digital Divide

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Technological and societal shifts have redefined how Americans work, get an education, and stay connected to loved ones. COVID-19 is laying bare the extent of the digital divide by region, socioeconomics, language, and age as students are asked to migrate to online learning programs, healthcare patients are asked to transition to telemedicine, and many in-home services switch to remote/virtual methods.

In this webinar, we spoke with four leaders in utilities, education, technology, and human services about the digital divide—the gap between those who can easily access and use remote/online services, and those who cannot. The panelists serve their communities on the front line professionally and personally and are voices for diversity and inclusion in their organizations and communities.

While we often think of the digital divide in terms of access to the internet (in some urban areas, the broadband access gap between students in households in neighboring school districts can be as wide as 30%) the panelists stressed that it's about more than just having a connection or device. In this memo, we summarize the findings from the virtual focus group as we hear how the transition is going on the ground for students, teachers, patients, care providers, and utility customers in Michigan and Arizona, what it takes to make progress, and what utilities can do.

This memo is divided into two sections:
(1) The state of small business and (2) ways that utilities and program administrators can align themselves with small businesses.

Implications for Organizations

- Devices are only the first step in bridging the digital divide.
- One cannot separate technology users from the home/family context.
- Ensuring equity requires an entire ecosystem of practices, support, and training.
- Rapid deployment has pushed organizations to innovate, expand their comfort zones.

Implications for Utilities and Program Administrators

- Stripping away hierarchies and engaging diverse teams can lead to better solutions, and better served communities.
- Utilities and program administrators should understand the household before expecting behavior changes at the individual level.
- Providing a human element, 'concierge' experience may help customers better engage.
- The lack of access to wi-fi enabled equipment may exacerbate the digital divide. In this memo, we focus on ways to weave (back) together health, energy, and the economy, and assess what metrics we have to draw these connections.

Devices are Only the First Step in Bridging the Digital Divide

The panelists stressed that digital connectivity is about more than an internet access and devices. Ensuring an equitable transition requires the motivation to make a change, e-literacy, accessible language, comfort with the new technology and interaction, and sometimes, a human "guide" to help people over the intimidation of what can be a scary new technology (like an online patient portal).

One Cannot Separate Technology Users from the Home/Family Context

Teachers and care providers are also considering the home and family context—whether users have a safe and private spot to engage and dedicated time, between taking care of their families and working. Figuring out how to serve and migrate customers to new platforms requires understanding and empathy. It also requires asking the right questions, for example, are they native English speakers? What is the dynamic in the **household around "school time"—will students be able to Zoom at a set time?**

Ensuring Equity Requires an Entire Ecosystem of Practices, Support, and Training

The panelists' organizations have partnered, donated funds, or worked to provide stable home internet to students and families, including ongoing service/maintenance to ensure sustained access. Before COVID-19, only 10% of students in Detroit Public Schools had both internet access and a device for remote learning (e.g., tablet or computer) at home. The University of Arizona also worked quickly to create digital hotspots across its campuses and remote locations for 45,000 students to access outside or from their cars, which served over 12,000 users through the end of April. To quickly migrate 1,200 behavioral health patients with critical weekly appointments online, Devereux realized they needed a human touch to guide patients, many of whom were intimidated by the new technology, to an online platform. As it turns out, many patients love the new format!

On the other side (behind the screen, if you will), educational and healthcare organizations and utility programs are figuring out how to train/enable their staff to deliver services using new technology. Migrating to entirely electronic medical records or Zoom-based classes was a big challenge. To get direct feedback, 65 employees at the University of Arizona made calls to 5,500 upcoming freshman (high school students) to see what they needed for their first year and how the university could help.

Rapid Deployment has Pushed Organizations to Innovate, Expand their Comfort Zones

Experimentation and innovation has been fast and furious. Our panelists' organizations tried things in the past two months that may otherwise have taken years to consider and pilot: *"Rapid testing made us try a bunch of new things we wouldn't have otherwise considered or tried, and some worked and people (users, practitioners) love them."* To innovate, the panelists recommend diversity and cross-departmental collaboration: *"Titles and hierarchy have to go out the door...release yourself from normative ways of thinking and making processes. Assemble people to represent a diverse set of ideas and viewpoints—that is essential."* Still, when pushing the envelope to try new things, one panelist recommended sticking to your core work and seeking partnerships for initiatives/skills outside of your expertise. A utility's existing supply chain, for example, could be used in different ways, like distributing devices or masks.

Implications for Utilities and their Customers

Stripping Away Hierarchies and Engaging Diverse Teams can lead to Better Solutions, and Better Served Communities

Though most utilities are starting to move in the direction of enabling cultures of rapid-experiments and lean innovation, panelists expressed that the move to swiftly deploy technologies (at scale) was a driver in creating the impetus for the organization to try new things. Words like "quick", "rapid", and "pivoting" were associated across the actions the virtual focus group participants' organizations were taking, and used to describe themselves. As the pandemic clearly upended business and organizational practices, utilities should see this as an opportunity to capitalize on setting the expectations for a more malleable workplace/team culture that can be nimbler in reacting to customer needs.

Utilities and Program Administrators Should Understand the Household Before Expecting Behavior Changes at the Individual Level

Technology enablement and the customer experience cannot be separated from the household; these are holistic. For utilities who can enable access or bring new technologies into a household, enabling technology creates shared benefits across members of a household, as evidenced in conversations with educational panelists who spoke about the advantages of providing devices for students to households that otherwise did not have these. Yet, when it comes to offerings, it is important to note that the existence of a technology/device in a home is governed by the activities and norms around a household. When thinking about new programs and offerings, utilities should seek to understand family routines, privacy, and other considerations that may affect face-to-face or asynchronous interactions.

Providing a Human Element, 'Concierge' Experience May Help Customers Better Engage

Nudging people to interact and become comfortable with technology is one way of bridging the digital divide. Connectivity and access are not synonymous, especially when it comes to low-access audiences. These groups, despite having access to a technology, may lack the technological literacy to have the same experience as digital natives. Panelists emphasized this point throughout the conversation, speaking about the need to support digital literacy. But another perhaps more important benefit of customer support can be one of enabling better outcomes. Healthcare providers are now faced with the dual task of helping patients navigate their healthcare portal and motivate them to stay healthy. These comments underscore the need to double down on the human element. It is important to consider age, language, and intimidation factor. To get customers motivated, engaged, and ready learn how to use technology, we propose the need for a human element or "concierge" interaction beyond the first use. Members of the panel explained that technology is always iterative and expanding, meaning that even those adapt at today's technologies/applications will need human support as new ones emerge. This can be the difference between thinking about customer support as a team within the enterprise, to customer support as central to human development and equity.

The Lack of Access to Wi-Fi Enabled Equipment May Exacerbate the Digital Divide

Low-income broadband programs and community partners are crucial in ensuring access to Wi-Fi, especially in distressed communities where broadband can be cost-prohibitive. As a stopgap, many families have to rely on mobile cell service as a substitute for Wi-Fi (not a long-term solution for bandwidth-heavy applications like Zoom). In Detroit, it is estimated that only 10% of students in the Detroit Community Public School District had access to both internet and a device. The dependability on broadband outside of the home was also questioned in recent data from the University of Arizona, which estimated as many as one in four students (23%) at the Research 1 university applied for emergency funding to pay for internet access and technology. Under these access constraints, utilities should think mobile first as a way of developing platforms and experiences that can be accessed and navigated from the convenience of a mobile device. Utilities may have to reconsider an access baseline, as Wi-Fi-enabled equipment like smart thermostats, DR, and other smart home offerings may exacerbate the digital divide. Finally, the panel overwhelmingly agreed that outside first use/first access, there are significant costs that accompany maintenance and sustained access. Though this is likely a conversation for another time, the impact of COVID-19 on the digital divide is sure to spark up more conversations about internet access as a public utility.

our panelists

Knox W. Cameron

Manager, Renewable Sales,
DTE Energy



Knox is responsible for developing and executing the sales strategy for DTE's MIGreenPower program, the second largest voluntary renewable program in the country. Knox is an industry leader with over a decade of experience designing, launching and managing utility programs. Knox is well versed in the areas of energy efficiency, demand response, operations and renewables. Knox served as the Co-chair of DTE's Diversity and Inclusion employee resource group and current serves on the Board of Directors for the Association of Energy Services Professionals. Born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, Knox moved with his family to the United States. Knox has a deep passion for soccer having played at the professional level. He holds graduate and undergraduate degrees from the University of Michigan.

Dr. Marla Franco

Assistant Vice Provost for Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) Initiatives,
University of Arizona



Dr. Franco has nearly 20 years of experience in higher education at public universities in California and Arizona, having served in various roles within academic and student affairs to champion greater college access and degree attainment among underserved and minoritized students. Dr. Franco has led efforts that resulted in the UA becoming the first four-year public university in the state of Arizona to be federally recognized as a Hispanic Serving Institution by the U.S. Department of Education and has co-authored publications to inform improved practice at HSIs. She is a first-generation college graduate, having earned degrees from the University of California, Berkeley; California State University, Long Beach; and her doctoral degree in higher education leadership from Azusa Pacific University.

Steve Holmes

Superintendent,
Sunnyside Unified School District



Steve Holmes is the Superintendent of the Sunnyside Unified School District, the second-largest School district in Southern Arizona, serving more than 16,000 students and supporting over 2,000 employees. Steve has over 24 years of successful service in public education and has provided clarity and insight in numerous national and international conversations; notably as a guest keynote for the Ministry of Education in Chile, as a panelist at the National Hispanic Caucus Conference, and as a key witness on behalf of the plaintiffs in the landmark case *Flores v. Arizona*. A graduate himself of the Sunnyside District, Steve earned his graduate degree from Harvard University and his undergraduate degree at the University of Arizona.

Dr. Yvette Jackson

Executive Director,
Devereux Arizona



Yvette Jackson is Executive Director of Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health Arizona where she oversees the care and treatment of more than 4,500 children and adolescents living with emotional, behavioral and cognitive differences. Yvette has more than 20 years of experience in the child and adolescent behavioral health and has managed more than 400 employees across the state, overseeing coaching and mentoring of the center's leadership team. Dr. Jackson is a faculty associate at Arizona State University, where she instructs graduate-level students in the area of social work and is the current chair of Devereux's national LGBTQ+ affinity group. She is a graduate of the University of Arizona and Arizona State University, where she earned her Master's of Social Work (LMSW) and Doctor of Behavioral Health.