

Introduction

If you support learners at a drop in, at some point you will need to start a conversation about digital, with someone who may not have gone along to learn digital skills!

You may have to walk up to a stranger in the library and ask if they would like to have some digital support or get chatting to someone at an event or day centre setting. Every Digital Champion volunteer needs to be able to introduce digital questions into an unrelated conversation.

But how do you do that? This is what this guide will give you. A few conversation starters, and bit of reassurance, and some tips on what to do and how to do it!

But what if they think I'm weird? Tips to get over nerves and awkwardness!

It's not odd or unpleasant for them!

Remember that if you are at an event, community space or drop-in session, people you speak to will have gone along hoping that someone else will speak to them. They are expecting someone to start chatting to them, so don't feel bad sitting down next to someone and starting a conversation. Think of a pleasant social interaction out of the norm – a snowy day, a sports team winning, a shared joke with a stranger. Your friendly chat to a new person, offering them something NICE is going to feel like this. Even an approach to someone in a library to share that you can help with digital is something positive.

Community is built on interactions like this. Some people's only social interaction is with a cashier in a supermarket – they might be really happy you've come and said hello.

It's you, not me.

If you detect some awkwardness, don't forget that the other person will be thinking about themselves, not about you. Other people think much more about themselves than about you! If the person is socially isolated or coming along to try something new, they may not make much conversation day to day.

If you hear an abrupt or awkward answer, it doesn't mean they don't want to speak to you – they might go home thinking "WHY did I say that, why am I so awkward?" Meanwhile, you are thinking "That person didn't want to talk to me". You don't know what's going on in someone else's head, so you might as well assume the best.

Remind yourself that not everyone communicates in the same way. Some people may come across blunt, rude, awkward or sarcastic – but actually you’ve really made their day chatting to them. Even if you aren’t one person’s cup of tea, that’s a ‘them’ problem. Move on and remember what a nice thing you are doing, putting yourself out there to help others. Don’t take criticism from someone whose advice you wouldn’t take!

Try, try again.

If you have a less than positive experience - never mind! Just go and find someone friendlier to talk to. If you are building a relationship with people at a coffee morning or day centre, you may have to have a lot of unrelated conversations before they trust you enough to ask you about Digital. Keep on trying.

Channel your confident friend

Think of that friend, family member or person you know who just starts talking to random people on the bus. That grandma who used to talk to everyone she met while walking to the shops. A charismatic person at work, maybe a celebrity you admire.

Pretend you are that person!

Remember your eccentric friend, that person who always does Karaoke or who might be a bit quirky, but makes you smile with their enthusiasm for talking about trains or knitting. Nothing bad happens from their quirkiness or outgoing nature or flamboyance – it’s just “them”. So any day you decide to temporarily adopt the persona of an outgoing, chatty Digital Champion- just put on that hat! You have nothing to lose, and nobody knows you are feeling wobbly inside. Even if you feel a bit awkward or embarrassed, remember you aren’t on stage or singing karaoke! What feels like all eyes on you is mainly in your own head, and most people think positively of other people, especially if you are helping them.

Remember you are useful

Even if the conversation starts a little awkwardly, remember you are useful! This is why you got into Digital Champion volunteering- to help people to feel more confident to use Digital. Who could be better than someone who doesn’t see themselves as a digital learner, wouldn’t know how to ask for help, or even that help is available? We often get comments like “I had no idea that this sort of help was here” or “I was surprised that you helped me sort that problem” or “I thought I was too stupid to learn that”.

Don't forget that starting a Digital conversation is new or tough for the person you are talking to. As you start a conversation, you are getting through their fear, ideas about digital, or shame, so that can make that chat feel trickier. Stick with it. This may be a new concept for them.

Case story – the miserable man.

"This one guy, he was so miserable the first time I met him, I mean, he said there was no community, no point, no help, and he was useless at Digital, Well, much to my surprise he turned up for the session the next week, barely joined in, and said we were all useless. Then the third week he turned up again, it felt like a major achievement, he nearly cracked a smile. Well, he's been turning up for 8 weeks now, every week. He still says we are all useless, but we tease him about it now, "you really boost my confidence don't you" etc. – and actually I'm so happy to see him, and I know he's happy to see us. He's part of our group, and I hope, in a small way, we are showing him there is a community that care about him."

Active listening

Active listening is where you make sure you are really listening to what the person says, and not just waiting for your chance to speak! You make sure you are making space for the person to speak more than you speak, and that you've understood.

It can be very easy to decide what you want to say as someone else is still in the middle of talking, and be in a hurry to say it, but you might miss some really important information at the end of the other person's sentence! Try to notice if you unconsciously do this as you go about your day.

Key parts of Active Listening

As you talk to someone, and you think you know what they've told you, reflect back to check you really have understood. With our miserable man above, you could say "So what I'm hearing is that you feel there is no community here any more – have I got that right? Or is it more about how you are feeling in yourself at the moment?"

Don't assume you have understood correctly, always check, even if it feels a bit awkward at first, it's better to understand, and it gives the other person 'permission' to clarify as well.

Ask "Is that right?" and "is that what you want to do?" as you offer help. This is part of checking the person is taking in information, and also that you've understood! They may see you as an 'expert' and be afraid to not just nod and smile!

"I don't know" is a pause to think. Give people space to think. It's very tempting to rush in with a solution or a suggestion. Some people will say "I don't know" as a filler, and actually they are thinking at the same time. Count a few more seconds than you usually feel comfortable with, just to see if the person needed time to think or process. Parents of teenagers are told to count as long as 10 seconds, as young brains need time to process a question!

There are whole courses and guides online just about active listening, so you may want to google more on this.

Second and third questions – active listening.

You can always work a question around to being about digital. Never miss a hint! You need to ask a second, third or fourth question. A lot of solutions involve using the internet to research a solution or support, or there may be a digital barrier for someone.

What questions could you ask to get to the basic digital skill behind the person's week?

Kira

"I've had a terrible week, you can't get a doctor's appointment any more, it's a nightmare"

Brian

"It's school holiday time soon. I'm dreading the bus journey to be honest, and the park gets full of kids".

Jess

"I'm so broke at the moment, everything seems to cost a fortune. I don't know what I'll do with the kids in the holidays"

Answers:

Kira

Oh no, that sounds so stressful! What happened when you tried to book? Does your doctor have online appointments? (and do you want some help) Potentially offer NHS app support as well, or NHS website "while you wait" support.

Alan

Where is he getting the bus, and what worries him? Would he consider Uber, or like to use the Bee app to find another route or a quieter time? Does he want some help to research online to find other activities that are grown-ups only?

Yes it's so tough at the moment, things are getting more and more expensive. Maybe there is something I can help you look up, I am a Digital Champion! Do you mind telling me a bit more about what's worrying you? (find out some more details) Research holiday HAF if kids are on free school meals, ask what activities they like to do, research free or cheap options. Look up Citizens advice info, or saving money online if appropriate. Would databank be useful? You have a to have more of a chat to work out what will help!

Case story – Phone from nowhere.

"We were helping at a coffee morning and started chatting to a lady who had come in for a chat and a brew. We asked how she felt about phones, and she shut us down pretty fast, "I hate mobiles and I don't have one". So we started chatting about her week, and she said she had a new grandchild. I said "Aww, that's lovely, do have any proud grandma photos?" and she said "Oh yes, and my son sends them to me on WhatsApp now!" We asked if she got WhatsApp on a tablet or a laptop. She then sheepishly said that actually she does have a phone, she just didn't want to talk to us to start with. We admired the new grandchild and chatted a bit about photos. We said "well, of course, you don't have to, but if you want us to help you save the photos to your phone, we can – do you want us to help?" - and we ended up answering loads of her questions about WhatsApp. It was good that we kept chatting, it just took her some time to trust us!"

Simple Structure for Good Interactions

When you're nervous, it helps to have a simple structure in your head. Most Digital Champion conversations follow the same pattern, even if they feel different each time.

1. Warm greeting

A smile, a hello, and something light. Sit down with the person. Visually check they are comfortable looking at you. Can they hear you ok? Introduce yourself as a volunteer.

2. Unrelated chat

A comment about their day, the event, the weather, the biscuits. This helps people relax. Ask them how they are, if they've been here before, or what they plan to do today.

3. Gentle digital question

A small, friendly question that opens the door without pressure. You might want to pick up on something they mentioned or use one of our conversation starters below!

4. Offer help (no pressure)

Make it clear that help is available, free, and optional.

"I can show you that now, if you want to?". Use the organisation's device if they feel happier with that.

5. Do one small thing

A tiny win builds trust. You don't need to fix everything.

6. Encourage them to come back, or ask for help next time.

Let them know you'd genuinely love to help again

Conversation starters

From experience, we know there are some conversation starters that work. Here are a few things we use:

- Do you have a phone, and does it annoy you? (lead into asking what specifically annoys them, or what they enjoy about their phone.)
- Do you worry about scams? Tell me more about that.
- We've often had people say they want to throw their device out the window! How do you feel about your devices, what do you use?
- What's the first app you open when you pick up your phone?
- If someone took your device away tomorrow, what would you miss about it?
- I'm a Digital Champion, as well as doing other volunteering here. I'm just chatting to people about what they think it means. What comes to mind when i say "Digital Champion" to you?
- What was the first computer or phone you ever used? (Boosts people's confidence as they often used devices more confidently in the past) How is this different to devices now?
- If someone gets chatting about pets/ a holiday/ kids.."That sounds amazing/ lovely / adorable – if you have photos you can show me if you like?" People will often get out a phone, or tell you they can't get photos.
- What's been your trickiest digital experience? I want to hear the horrors!
- Show me how you use your device now.
- What's something digital, or something on your phone, you've heard someone mention, and you thought "What on earth is THAT?" I'm here to translate digital mysteries for you!
- Some people have told us they have helpful relatives or friends who go "clickety click" on their phone - but they have no idea what they did to it! What's something you'd like me to teach you on your phone so you can impress your techy friend or realative? Let's surprise them!

Getting people over to a quiet session.

When you approach someone cold, it's best to be short and direct, and maybe have a joke in there as well. If they start to talk more, that's when you can use the other skills in this guide. Some people like to start a conversation with what they can help with right from the start! Which script feels most like you? You can practice these until they feel natural.

Here is a simple script that you can follow to help you get started

- "Hi, sorry to bother you, I just wanted to let you know I'm a Digital Champion volunteer. That means I can help with questions or problems with using a computer or a phone, it's free! We all get bored if we don't have anyone to help, so please do come down on a (data and time) we are here every week. If you know someone else who needs this help, I can give you this flyer?"
- "I won't interrupt your coffee for too long, but I just wanted to let you know I'm a Digital Champion volunteer, here today to give people a hand with phones or computers, if you have a phone and it annoys you, that's what I'm here for! I'll pop back later, but please do come over and say hi, I'd love to help out"
- "I'm from a charity called Starting Point, based in Stockport. I'm a volunteer, a Digital Champion – we've teamed up with (this organisation) and I help people out every week, here (time and date) with computer and phone troubles! I love a knotty problem, please come over and say hi if I can help"
- "Mentioning you are from a charity, that you are a volunteer, and that it's free can all help (actually, Starting Point is a social enterprise, but people understand charity better!) People may be wary of who you are, or if you are selling something, so this is reassuring."
- "Hiya, I'm one of the Digital Champions here today. I help people with phones and computers — anything that's annoying you! No pressure at all, but if you fancy a hand, I'm around."
- "Hello! I'm a Digital Champion, which basically means I help people stop throwing their phones out the window. If your device has been winding you up, I'm your person."
- "Hi, I'm a Digital Champion volunteer. I'm still getting used to chatting to new people, but I can help with phones or online things if you ever want a hand. I'm a bit nervous myself, so I'm looking for nice people to give me something useful to do! Will you guys take pity on me and ask me a phone or a computer question?!"

Turning it into a digital chat.

This is a skill that you develop over time. If you are in a quiet session, see if you can practice with another Digital Champion, or ask Starting Point staff to help you.

Digital comes into nearly every part of life, so actually, you can often introduce a question about digital confidence. Remember that you don't have to solve a problem there and then, you can offer – but actually if you see someone regularly at a session you may just be putting it in their minds that they can ask you if they want to.

Mention there is a useful resource online, or ask what someone thinks about the digital option

Offer to help in a low pressure way. "Well, I don't know if you know, but I'm actually a Digital Champion volunteer, as well as (usual role) That means I can help with things like using websites, or your device. No pressure! But we can have a quick look if you want to? Someone will be here every week, even if it's not me, just ask (best person)

Topics of conversation and their matching digital topics!

As part of a general chat, these topics are the ones that people usually engage with, and which relate most to general conversations.

- Health related – NHS app, booking online GP appointments, NHS website
- Money – Citizens advice, price comparison websites, Stockport council cost of living website, databank. Universal credit online diaries. You Gov website.
- Work – Using AI to write a CV or search for jobs online. Learn worlds guides on these topics, Low cost devices
- Families. - online safety, parental controls, school apps, finding childcare, safe apps for young children. Learning online (BBC, museum and Nasa websites) gaming.
- Older people – tech and independence, photos, avoiding scams, health, changing tech, AI fears, shopping online.
- Disability – Ability net website, local council support, national charities for specific health conditions. Ordering a Radar key online.

- Everyone – settings, emails, folders on devices, cloud storage, data use, photos, What's app. Avoiding scams. Local activities in Stockport.
- Travel - Google maps. In Case of Emergency number on phones, Bee app and Trainline app for public transport, Ringo for parking and Uber for taxis. Booking travel online (ie checking in at an airport online)
- Hobbies – Pinterest or YouTube for crafts or DIY. Sport related websites. National organisations for each sport or hobby. Local groups and meet ups online. Local social media groups (watch out if people have negative experiences of social media) General google searching on that topic!

Encourage people to come back

After you've helped someone, remind them that they can come back. Some tips for this:

Questions from our Learner progress form

We have a form for collecting learner's feedback, that is stored securely on the Starting Point database. This won't be suitable for all learners or all locations! However, it is interesting what happens in someone's head when you ask them these questions, and it can help people to come back and learn more, rather than seeing this as a one off problem fixing service.

- Did you make progress today? (Answer is 99% of the time 'yes!' This means they have to get over the "I'm useless" thought.
- What would help you next time? More of the same, help with a new digital topic, or a guide on a topic?" This gets people thinking – what can a learn next, and gives them permission to come back.

Tell them you would love if they asked you for help again. That you get bored with nobody to help, and please bring a friend! It's surprising how much people think they are a 'burden' and this makes it seem like they are doing you a favour!

Say "I think this was quite stressful for you today / that digital task was quite scary do you agree (?) (active listening!) We'd love for you to come back and practice those skills doing something FUN next time. (give some suggestions) There are lots of low stress, fun stuff to do online that I can help you with. Then next time something scary comes up online, of course I can help you again, but actually I would love to help you boost your skills so it's less alarming next time, and maybe you'll feel a bit better about it?

Encourage them (gently) to get a notebook. Note down any digital or device questions that come up as they go about their day (give examples) What was that weird pop up? What's AI? How do I do bold writing on What's app? Then next time you can look at their questions with them.

The more you have these conversations, if you have regulars, the less you will have to have these conversations, as regular coffee morning participants will start to recommend you! There will always be new people, so get these skills out. Have I gone too far? When someone looks like they've had enough.

Fake it till you make it

Some of the tips in here may feel a bit awkward. Not all of us are used to starting conversations with strangers! It will get easier the more you practice.

- See if you can re-word things so they sound more like you.
- Think about positive interactions with new people, what did they do or say to make you feel at ease?
- Chat to other Digital Champions about what they say or do, and practice on each other in quiet sessions.
- Finally, fake it till you make it! The first time anyone says "I'm hearing this, but did you mean..." it feels weird, but we promise that the person does not look at you like you turned into a blue three headed alien. They don't know that "I'm hearing this" isn't part of your everyday vocabulary, only you know it feels a bit weird. Try the scripts in here and let us know how it goes! You have nothing to lose.

Remember why you are doing this! Some comments to keep you going.

Real comments from our learners below...

"I really loved the chat, not just the digital side of things"

"Everyone is so friendly"

"It's so hard to ask for help, not everyone has time, and I feel stupid"

"I had no idea this was even here, what a wonderful service"