Good practice principles to support the digital wellbeing of your learners and staff

Guidance paper for senior leaders

Digital wellbeing - the impact of technologies and digital services on people's mental, physical and emotional health

What is digital wellbeing?

Digital wellbeing is a term used to describe the impact of technologies and digital services on people's mental, physical, social and emotional health. It is a complex concept that can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and across different contexts and situations:

Individual perspective – personal, learning and work contexts: this involves identifying and understanding the positive benefits and any potential negative aspects of engaging with digital activities and being aware of ways to manage and control these to improve wellbeing.

Societal or organisational perspective: providers of digital systems, services and content have a responsibility for ensuring that these are well managed, supported, accessible and equitable. They also need to empower in users and build their capabilities so that all who engage with them are equipped to do so in a way that enhances their wellbeing.

What are the issues?

Supporting digital wellbeing is an important part of the duty of care that organisations have for their learners and staff. It also contributes to wider accessibility and inclusion issues. Improving mental health for learners is a current focus for providers.

Individuals engage in many positive digital activities, but there can be some negative effects that could impact on their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. Providers need to assess and understand the impact of any digital systems, tools, content and services that learners and staff use and to know how to highlight the benefits and minimise any negative aspects.

Our good practice principles provide a framework that will help providers to explore these important issues and to develop policies, practices and behaviours that contribute to the digital wellbeing of all users.

Good practice principles for organisation-wide approaches to digital wellbeing

Our model shows **four** aspects of individual digital wellbeing surrounded by **eight** good practice principles.

At the bottom of our model there are two triangles that represent the potential positive and negative impacts of technology on wellbeing. The middle triangle focuses on the potential for technologies to improve wellbeing and the top triangle emphasises that individuals need both awareness and capacity to change their digital practices. Adoption of our eight good practice principles will help **providers** to enhance and develop learner and staff **digital wellbeing**.
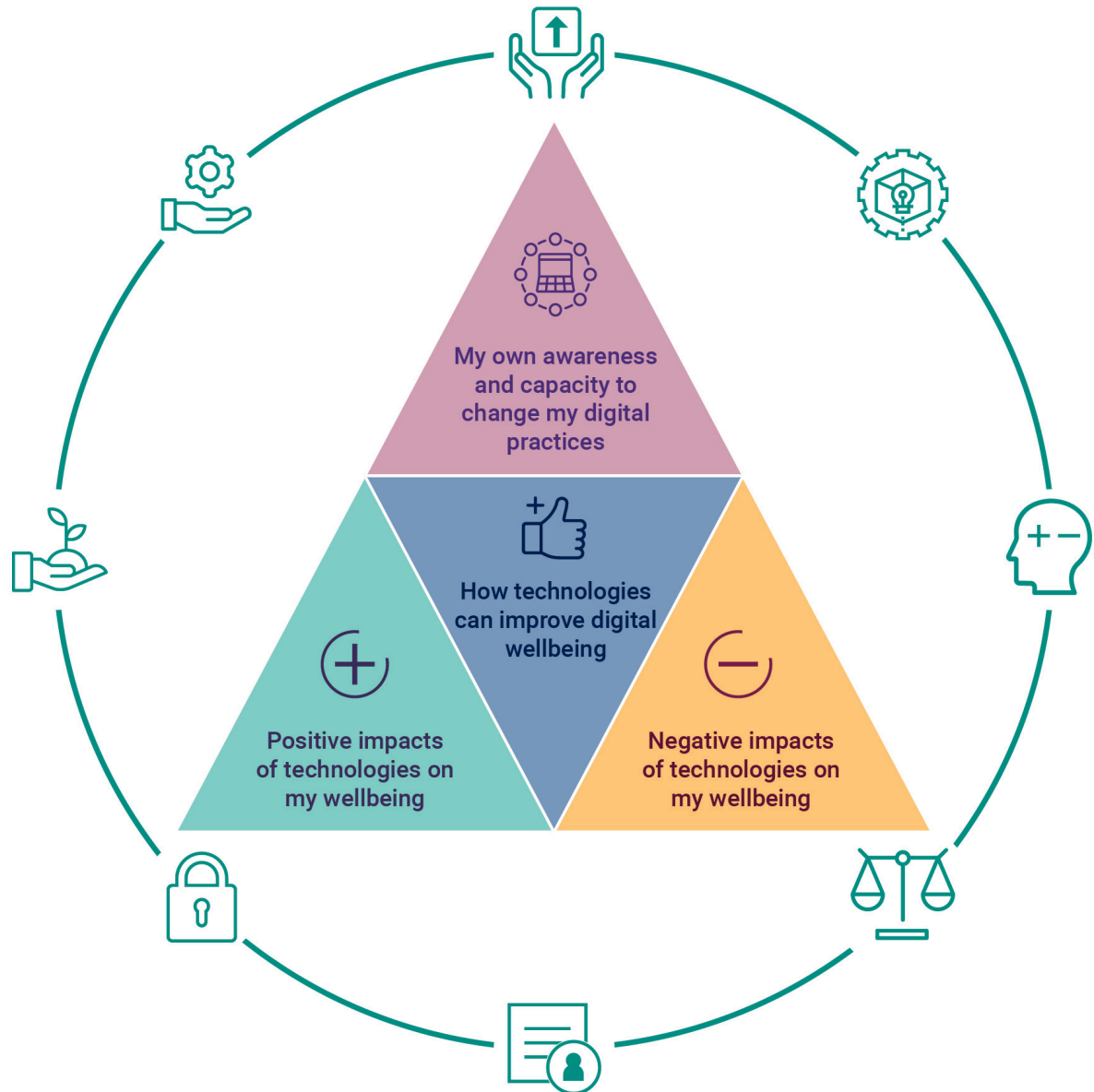
Provide inclusive and responsive services that support digital work or learning activities:

- Engage with staff and learners to find out how digital activities, tools and content affect their wellbeing

- Ensure that staff support services understand aspects of digital wellbeing and the challenges that working with technologies might present

- Ensure that staff in learner support services who deal with general wellbeing are aware of ways in which digital activities, tools and content can positively or negatively affect wellbeing

- Ensure that learning activities and learner support services are inclusive for everyone, considering diversity, equity and inclusion

Incorporate digital wellbeing into existing policies and strategies:

- Learning, teaching and assessment strategies and/or policies

- Accessibility and inclusion strategies and/or policies

- Digital or ICT strategies and/or policies

- Marketing strategy and/or policies

- Human resources policies

- Quality assurance policies

- Research strategies and/or policies

My own awareness and capacity to change my digital practices

How technologies can improve digital wellbeing

Positive impacts of technologies on my wellbeing

Negative impacts of technologies on my wellbeing

Provide safe physical and online environments:

- Offer physical spaces for learners that include good ergonomic design, appropriate lighting, WiFi, other equipment and power supplies

- Ensure staff working areas comply with health and safety regulations

- Provide information and guidance about the physical aspects of using technologies (eg musculoskeletal health, sleep, eyestrain, posture)

- Provide information and guidance about emotional and mental health aspects of using technologies (eg managing digital workload, identifying signs of stress or anxiety caused by digital activities, addictive behaviours, staying safe online)

Comply with the duty of care to staff and students in relation to digital work or learning activities:

- Give staff and learners opportunities to inform their managers or tutors about their digital needs and preferences and respond appropriately

- Consider the digital needs of staff and learners when designing new spaces and creating new job roles or new courses/training

- Provide information and guidance on a range of digital wellbeing issues that staff and/or learners may experience

- Gather data (learning and/or wellbeing analytics) to inform planning and responses to problems

Meet ethical and legal responsibilities in relation to accessibility, health, equality and inclusion:

Comply with regulations that may impact on the digital wellbeing of staff and learners. For example:

- Health and safety regulations/ Online Safety Act 2023
- Employment law
- Information management (Data protection, GDPR, Freedom of Information [FoI], Electronic Identification and Trust Services [eIDAS] Regulation)
- Equality Act 2010, Human Rights Act 1998
- HE regulations (Equality impact assessment regulatory frameworks for HE, Higher Education and Research Act 2017, Framework for Higher Education Qualification (FHEQ), Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)
- FE regulations (Further and Higher Education Act 1992)
- Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018

Provide appropriate training, educational opportunities, guidance and support for participation in digital work or learning activities:

- Identify any opportunities within the curriculum to highlight digital wellbeing issues (eg in skills for work or employment sessions, when learners are participating in collaborative group work)
- Produce guidelines on digital wellbeing (eg staying safe online, social media use, managing workload, planning for studying, digital identity management)
- Provide sessions for staff with opportunities to discuss the benefits and challenges of technologies for their wellbeing (eg in appraisals and staff development activities)
- Include digital wellbeing in staff and learner induction programmes

Understand potential positive and negative impacts of digital work or learning activities on wellbeing:

- Acknowledge the effect of changing job roles and identify the experience and knowledge that staff need to adapt to new technologies and digital practices
- Support staff through organisational changes that result from digital transformation
- Encourage staff to identify and share the benefits and challenges when introducing new technologies or digital practices in work or learning contexts
- Survey the benefits and challenges of changing digital work or learning practices to inform the wider community

Provide inclusive and accessible digital systems, tools and content:

- Give staff opportunities to feed back about the impact of digital work practices and about how using digital tools and systems affects their wellbeing
- Give learners opportunities to feed back about their digital learning practices and respond sensitively to what they say they want (or prefer) when using technologies for learning
- Ensure that staff understand and can comply with government accessibility regulations and requirements for producing online content
- Provide assistive technologies as appropriate or allow alternative technologies to be used by staff or learners with different preferences and needs

Who is responsible for digital wellbeing?

The simplest answer is that individuals are personally responsible for their digital wellbeing but that colleges, universities, and indeed every provider of digital systems, content and services also have responsibilities.

Four educational contexts for digital wellbeing

Digital social wellbeing

Digital personal wellbeing

Digital learning wellbeing

Digital work wellbeing

For **individuals** in an education context, digital wellbeing links closely to their personal and social digital wellbeing and to developing and managing their professional and personal digital identities and footprints.

Individuals have opportunities to take responsibility for their own digital wellbeing in personal, learning or work contexts. To do this effectively they need to be aware of, and be able to change, digital practices that might have a negative impact on their wellbeing. They also need to know how some technologies could improve their wellbeing.

Although it is important for individuals to take control of their digital wellbeing, they may not always have the opportunity or the ability to manage the impact of technologies or digital services on their lives. For example, in employment contexts where staff may not be able to make changes or in personal contexts where individuals may not have access to, or be included in, digital opportunities that could have a positive effect on their lives. It is also important to remember that individuals may not have the support or capacity to counteract negative effects of technologies.

As employers and as providers of digital systems, content, services and learning opportunities – learning providers have multiple responsibilities in relation to digital wellbeing. Staff need to be able to take advantage of technology to carry out their job roles without compromising their physical, mental and emotional health and learners need to be able to study effectively and experience a positive learning experience.

There are several actions that can be taken to support staff and learners – our good practice principles will help.

Incorporating digital wellbeing into existing organisational activities

As education providers adopt measures to support the mental health of staff and students it is timely to consider digital wellbeing as part of these discussions and activities.

Many providers are also addressing digital wellbeing as part of their wider organisational approach to enhancing digital capability through the **Jisc building digital capability service** (https://digitalcapability.jisc.ac.uk).

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