Returning Citizens' Job Search and Technology Use: Preliminary Findings

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Abstract

In this work, we seek to understand how returning citizens (formerly incarcerated individuals) interact with digital technologies, both in general and for job search. Using semi-structured interviews we interviewed fifteen returning citizens who were released within the past year. We find that returning citizens depend heavily on family and close friends for purchasing, using, and learning about digital technology, but that this help rarely extends to support job-search tasks. We also find that many recent re-entrants do not use social media.

Author Keywords

Returning citizen; formerly incarcerated; incarceration; prison; reentry; digital literacy; employment

Introduction

One of the key challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals, hereinafter referred to as *returning citizens*, is finding employment [1]–[3]. Job search is challenging as it is, but returning citizens face additional obstacles due to their criminal record and patchy employment history. Additionally, finding a job today involves digital elements, whether it is searching for job postings, preparing a resume, applying online, or communicating via email; inmates have very limited opportunities to learn digital skills [4], [5].

In this study, we conduct a preliminary investigation of how returning citizens in southeastern Michigan search for jobs and use technology. We extend prior human-computer interaction literature that explores the role of

technology in job search, particularly among underserved populations [6]–[11]. Our work also contributes to the recent HCI literature concerned with prisons and incarcerated individuals [12].

Related Work
Challenges in Reentry
The main challenges for returning citizens are employment, housing, family support, community support, and healthcare [1], [2]. Most research in this area highlights employment as a top challenge in reentry [1], [13]. Little research, however, investigates how returning citizens use digital technology or search for jobs since the mainstreaming of the internet.

Returning Citizens and their Job Search
For the purposes of this study, we define job search as searching for work, or pursuing self-employment opportunities. It is known that returning citizens face discrimination [14] and worry about disclosing their criminal history [15]. Additionally, many returning citizens lack a college degree and many come from low socio-economic backgrounds, which also create barriers to jobs and resources [15]. Very little previous research, however, has examined how job search intersects with digital literacy for returning citizens.

In HCI, researchers have investigated job search among low-resource job seekers [6]–[11], the possibilities of HCI for prisons and incarcerated individuals [12], but there has been no close examination of the digital literacy skills of formerly incarcerated individuals. And, while there has been research on how to reduce incarceration [16] , little work has considered returning citizens' use of technology or potential digital technology interventions.

Digital Literacy, Job Seekers, and Reentry
A Pew Research Study notes the critical importance of digital literacy in job search in general [5]. Flipping earlier findings that emphasize word of mouth, online resources (79%) are now used by more people than personal networks (66%) [5]. To our knowledge, the only published studies to consider digital literacy in returning-citizen job search so far are Reisdorf and Rikard [17] and Sugie [18]. Sugie examined returning citizens' cell phone usage patterns for three months after their release. She found inconsistent job searching behavior on participant phones which she concluded may have led to poor job search outcomes [18]. However, this study focused only on cell phones. Reisdorf and Rikard offered a framework for incorporating digital literacy when considering returning citizen reentry needs, but only proposes suggestions for future research [17].

Methodology
Fifteen returning citizens (3 women, 12 men) released in the previous year were interviewed for 30-90 minutes using a semi-structured protocol. Participants were recruited via three reentry organizations and snowball sampling. Interviews occurred in neutral locations such as libraries and cafés. Participants were compensated $30 for time and transport costs. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic clustering and iterative summarization, with a focus on content not revealed in previous literature. For our preliminary results we analyzed six of the fifteen interviews.

Preliminary Findings
Daily Use of Technology
Most of our participants mentioned that family and friends were critical for technology access. All of our participants obtained a phone within days, if not hours, of release. P2 (50s, in and out of jail since 17) stated they received their phone fully set up from their brother. P5 (30s, incarcerated for 3 years) mentioned a friend provided a phone within two weeks of release. P4 (50s, incarcerated since 19) mentioned obtaining his phone the day after release accompanied by his wife.

Returning citizens used their phones for voice calls, entertainment, daily tasks (e.g., bus schedules), and occasional tasks relevant to job search. P2 mentioned using their phone for calling and setting appointments. P4 mentioned that his daughter and niece showed him several tasks on his phone. He said that they showed him how to "take pictures on it, how to download apps and get certain things or information… Google, You-Tube, how, if you want to learn stuff, go to YouTube."

Learning about Technology
Family was also cited for teaching basic digital literacy skills. P4 mentioned, "[My daughter will] take me and show me a lot of the stuff that you would take for granted every day, and then she will rehearse… with me because she knows I might not get it... Like I might go to [the] store with her and she's like, 'Here, use this credit card. Put it in the thing, swipe it, do this, do that.' And she'll make me do it."

However, while this kind of learning was essential, it tended to remain at a superficial or recreational level and rarely went into more substantial skills to support job search. For example, when P2 was asked what items his family and friends showed him how to use on his phone, he responded, ``Facebook. Plenty of fish dot com. What else. Oh, how to use the internet.''

Social Media
While most of our participants' use of digital technology is similar to that of mainstream users, they differed in their lack of use, and in some instances, active avoidance of social media. For example, P14 (40s, incarcerated twice in the past 5 years) mentioned not wanting to stumble into inappropriate content while using the internet. He chose to stay with a feature phone. P10 (50s, incarcerated since 25) wanted to learn more about digital technology, but said that he did not want to be too attached to his phone. Some had parole restrictions on whom they could interact with, and social media was seen as a channel by which to

accidentally transgress. No participant mentioned social media sites that they interact with on a daily basis.

Resumes
Most returning citizens did not have a strong need for resumes. They obtained most jobs through word of mouth or referral. In addition, their jobs often involved manual work that did not require resumes. P2 explained he never needed a resume. When asked about finding jobs, P4 said, "People that I've known since I was a kid. Or like, my auntie or she knows people." Several participants also noted that before release, they were given reentry readiness courses where a resume was created. Often, however, it was prepared with a computer without internet access, or by an instructor who typed the resume on their behalf.

Discussion
Based on these preliminary findings, it is clear that returning citizens would benefit from improved digital literacy, especially with respect to job search. While in some ways, returning citizens are like mainstream users of digital technology – they use technology for communication with friends and relatives, entertainment, and bus schedules – in others they differ considerably. Those with longer sentences arrive at digital technology fresh, with no experience or background, and younger family or community members play a frequent role in basic digital literacy. Unlike mainstream users, returning citizens seem to have limited engagement with social media for a range of reasons (though they acknowledged its potential value for the future). Finally, they did not maximize use of digital technology for job search, suggesting that there are many opportunities for HCI engagement in this area. In future work, we plan to investigate what kind of digital literacy content and pedagogy is useful to returning citizens, specifically for job search tasks.

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