



Bridging the Digital Divide: Northwest Wisconsin's Innovative Approach to Digital Capacity

Situation

The Northwest Wisconsin Workforce Investment Board (NWWIB), led by CEO Mari Kay Nabozny, oversees the public workforce system across ten counties, mirroring the Northwest Regional Planning footprint. Recognizing significant gaps in digital capacity, NWWIB aimed to assess and address these disparities, particularly among underserved populations such as transitioning service members, individuals with disabilities, justice-impacted individuals, and low-income residents. To achieve this, they secured a grant from the Wisconsin Public Service Commission.

Response

NWWIB implemented a two-pronged approach to gather data: through an online survey and focus groups within each of the region's ten counties. Libraries hosted focus groups, and incentives like food and digital gift cards were provided to boost participation. Despite initial challenges with responses from "bots" in the online survey, the team managed to filter out invalid entries, resulting in 480 completed surveys from an initial 12,000. When focus groups saw low attendance, NWWIB pivoted to engaging with the community at local festivals and fairs, using creative methods like branded shirts with slogans such as "Ask me about broadband" and quick in-person surveys to gather data. They also utilized American Job Centers to reach covered populations already accessing their services.

Outcomes

The project successfully highlighted digital capacity gaps within the ten-county region. The data collected was instrumental in informing the PSC's statewide plan. The pivot to collecting data at local festivals also provided insights from summer visitors, adding a valuable dimension to the findings. This comprehensive data allowed NWWIB to pinpoint specific areas and demographics needing the most support.

Lessons Learned

1. **Adaptability is Key:** The initial focus group approach was less effective but pivoting to community events significantly improved engagement. This flexibility allowed the team to gather more relevant data and reach a broader audience.
2. **Incentives Matter:** Offering digital gift cards increased online survey participation, highlighting the importance of motivating participants with tangible rewards.
3. **Bot Management:** Filtering out bot responses was crucial for data integrity. The team learned the importance of implementing robust measures to ensure the integrity of online survey data.
4. **Collaboration:** Maintaining communication with other agencies, such as libraries and American Job Centers prevented data collection overlap and maximized resource use. This collaboration ensured a comprehensive understanding of the digital capacity landscape and avoided redundant efforts.
5. **Engaging the Community:** Creative engagement and outreach strategies, like branded shirts and festival participation, were highly effective in gathering data. These methods not only increased survey participation but also made the data collection process more visible and approachable to the community.

This case study highlights the importance of flexibility in outreach and engagement with the public, clever use of incentives, and the importance of collaboration for effective identification of needs.

Learn More

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