

In any case, returning citizens appear to be reasonably prepared for the job market, though the degree to which their specific preparation matches their aspirations is highly variable.

Offline Job Search. Prison systems often provide reentry classes and resources about organizations that hire felons. However, these were generally perceived by our participants as inadequate: They were out of date, focused on low-wage jobs, or simply insufficient in terms of the breadth and depth of knowledge or support they offered. Meanwhile, government and non-profit resources for returning citizens are generally underfunded, so even when well-intentioned, they are unable to provide the intensive, individualized attention that returning citizens need [13]. As a result, returning citizens must rely on their own social networks and street smarts to find work, and they must do this while navigating some difficult constraints.

Among the constraints are parole restrictions that inhibit the type of work they could perform. This further narrowed job opportunities for some participants. For example P15 (male, 65+, incarcerated since 25) alluded to being geographically tethered during parole (a tether is a legal or electronically enforced restriction on where the parolee can go):

I'm tethered right now. I'm more restricted. Tethered for 90 days. After 90 days I'd be on tether where I can move around and go anywhere I want to in [this state]... And after I get out there I'm going to get a job. I can get a job now, but there's so much restriction on it.

Other constraints are those imposed by family on whom the returning citizen relies. Several of our participants mentioned pressures to get “just any job,” even if it did not fit their self-image.

Whatever the difficulties, returning citizens must nevertheless navigate an unfriendly job market. Because so much white-collar work is dependent on a successful background check (that would instantly disqualify our participants), the obvious options available to them are low-skill jobs – manual labor, retail jobs, and informal work. These jobs in turn appear to be less systematic than white-collar jobs in being posted online or on government job-matching services. As a result, our participants relied heavily on their (non-virtual) social networks, with friends and family again figuring prominently. Almost all of our participants had stories about landing or hearing of jobs through word of mouth.

But direct, offline interaction with potential employers was so important for our participants that many developed strategies to increase such opportunities. Some of our participants mentioned meeting people on the street, at job fairs, networking events, or even while driving on the road. When

asked how he found employment, P14 (male, 45+, incarcerated twice since age 35) said,

Just going down the road... Yeah. I mean, I've been at a stop light before. So, you're sitting at a light, a truck pulls up. [You say,] 'Hey, you guys doing any hiring?' 'Well, yeah. What kind of work you into?' 'Dude, I can work for you two days [free].'

Several participants mentioned informal work as options, as well. For example, P13 (male, 55+, incarcerated for two years) was a mechanic who worked on cars for family and friends on an as-needed basis. Another example was P2 (male, 45+, in and out of prison since 17) was a tattoo artist who took on informal jobs.

Job Search and Digital Technology. Not surprisingly, most participants mentioned using their mobile phone to call contacts about job opportunities, to arrange meetings, and to follow up with potential employers. Most participants additionally used online search on their smartphones to search for jobs. The job-searching site, Indeed.com, was mentioned frequently in this context, and several of our participants showed us how they searched for jobs on their smartphones.

Critically, however, online job search was fraught with unexpected challenges (unexpected to us, in any case), and online application processes – which almost all of our participants had encountered – presented a impenetrable obstacle.

P19's case illustrates one of the problems:

I start typing. I'll start answering questions. Next thing you know, it will throw me off and it will switch over to another list of jobs. Next thing, it will start talking about educational opportunities... 'Are you interested in this?' Like, I don't want to waste time on education until I get a job first.

We believe that this was an instance of pop-up ads and predatory advertising, though it was not clear whether the participant initially landed on an illegitimate site posing as a job-search site, or whether he accidentally clicked on an exploitative ad from a legitimate site. Other participants mentioned dialog boxes asking them questions such as, “Do you smoke?”, or “How old are you?” both of which seem likely to be illegitimate sites.

Some participants understood online job search to be a numbers game. P5 (male, 25+, incarcerated for 4 years), for example, searched for jobs in the Indeed app. He said,

I just apply to everything... They all look the same reasonable, I guess.

Going into this research, we imagined that writing resumes would be an important part of the job search process,

but we found it to be a marginal issue for most our participants for three reasons. First, the jobs they applied to often involved manual work that did not require resumes. P2, who had skills in plumbing, dry wall, framing houses, tree cutting, and tattooing, explained he never needed a resume. Second, jobs were sometimes offered by people they knew. P4 (male, 55+, incarcerated for over 40 years) said that those who hired him were “people that I’ve known since I was a kid. Or like, my auntie or she knows people.” And third, several participants noted that before release, they were given reentry readiness courses where a resume was the final product, and which sufficed for most job search purposes. The resumes were typically prepared on a computer without internet access, or by an instructor who typed the resume on their behalf. P14 (male, 45+, incarcerated twice since age 35) said,

Well, [the prison] had computers, but only staff was allowed to be on the computers... I told 'em I couldn't read and write. So, they went over, they did everything for me, printed everything out and gave it to me.

Finally, we heard from several participants how they navigated disclosing their criminal background during interviews. In our state as in many others, the Department of Corrections makes records of incarceration available online for public search. Participants varied in how they went about disclosing their criminal background but were all aware that their criminal history would come out eventually during their job search.

5 PHASE II ACTION RESEARCH: FINDINGS AND ITERATIVE COURSE DESIGN

We now turn to findings from Phase II. The sections below represent several iterations of the plan-act-reflect cycle of action research, with each cycle intended to improve on the curriculum.

Initial Curriculum

Our initial curriculum was developed in response to the insights from previous work, findings from Phase I, and our desire to run the course in a participatory manner. We thus skipped introductory concepts such as “This is what clicking means,” or “What is a website?” (common to existing digital literacy training materials) and instead designed each class around a practical job search or entrepreneurial goal that took simple digital skills for granted. Our hope was to simultaneously teach job-search/entrepreneurial skills and advanced digital literacy. For example, for the first class, the goal was to open a LinkedIn account and complete one’s own profile. This would serve as an entryway to social media with limited risk of breaking parole injunctions, while also provided job-search skills directly. A range of other such

decisions went into the curriculum design. An overview of the topics we *intended to cover originally*, numbered by week, is as follows:

- (1) Introductions, open lab, LinkedIn. Goal: start a LinkedIn profile and send messages to prospective employers.
- (2) Open lab, basic job search skills. Goal: learn to search for jobs on Indeed.com.
- (3) Open lab, marketing and advertising, content management systems. Goal: set up a simple personal webpage.
- (4) Open lab, customer insight, ready-made online tools. Goal: draft an online survey.
- (5) Open lab, budgeting, spreadsheets. Goal: start a monthly budgeting tool using Google Sheets.
- (6) Open lab, networking, social media. Goal: connect to non-felon, productive contacts on LinkedIn.

The First Class

The intended goals of the first class were largely not met, and after it, we revised the remaining lesson plans dramatically.

What Actually Happened. To begin with, only two of the students were able to attend. The other two were unsuccessful in their bids to have parole restrictions waived for the course. (The restriction was waived in time for the the third class for P3, but P4 was unable to attend any of the classes.)

We also found that starting with open lab exacerbated the problems of diversity in digital literacy, rather than alleviating them. P1 wanted to learn about Skype, because he had heard about making ‘free’ telephone calls. P2, though he brought a laptop with him, said that he did not know what he did not know, and wanted guidance on what he should learn first. He also expressed interest in writing a resume. His laptop flickered from the battery not holding charge. These issues required in-depth responses. Though 45 minutes were allocated to open lab, only minor tasks had been accomplished, issues (such as privacy settings) had been glossed over, and relatively little had been absorbed by the students.

Then, the students were brought back together for the session on LinkedIn. The hope for the end of the day was to have students set up with their own LinkedIn profiles and to send potential employers messages via the platform. In practice, P2 became stuck on account creation, and was ultimately unable to verify his account through either LinkedIn’s email or mobile-based verification methods. It eventually turned out that P2’s smartphone email app was not synchronizing correctly, but by the time that was understood, the class was over.

Reflections and Adaptations. The first class taught us a number of lessons: parole restrictions require weeks to negotiate, so students must be given plenty of advance notice about

classes. Having students bring their own devices helps them to become better acquainted with their own devices, but it increases time needed for troubleshooting. Smartphone literacy does not necessarily translate to laptop literacy – basic computer skills must still be covered for some groups (the simplified interfaces of smartphones arguably give users an illusion of digital literacy). In order to establish a common base of understanding, it is helpful to start with somewhat more structure (efforts toward participatory design can go too far). Despite what participants said in interviews about resumes, they still valued the knowledge required to write formal documents on a computer.

We applied what we learned and changed the ensuing lesson plans each session. We held open labs at the end of each class, not at the beginning. We slowed down the pace of the classes. We eliminated per-class goals, in favor of smaller tasks. We added modules on basic digital literacy skills as well as on requested skills such as resume-writing. All of these changes were incorporated by the second class.

Further Iterations

Space does not permit a detailed account of every change in our curriculum, but we summarize some of the other key findings and adaptations from Phase II here.

We found that some of our students were less-than-fluent readers, and none were fluent typists. We had students practice typing during the initial ten minutes of the class for the last three classes, and we adapted teaching styles so as to verbally spell out strings the instructor typed during class demonstrations.

Students often clicked on ads and became lost in a maze of pop-up dialogues and predatory webpages. (We speculate that this was, in part, due to a combination of slow textual literacy among some participants, as well as lack of experience with critical media reading.) Lessons were adjusted to include a discussion of the Wild West that is the modern internet, as well as tips to avert these online traps.

We found that students often turned to their more familiar devices – their smartphones – even when their laptops were right in front of them, so we replaced the sixth session with a session on improving smartphone skills.

Our final curriculum (Week 2 onward) differed considerably from the one we initially planned:

- (2) Basics of Internet and email, open lab.
- (3) Online search, online job forms, and cover letters.
- (4) Typing, hyperlinks, online ads and click-bait, open lab.
- (5) Typing, files, folders, uploading/downloading, open lab.
- (6) Typing and smartphone literacy: Indeed.com app, web and voice-based search, finding apps, open lab.

6 DISCUSSION

Our work confirms and extends the existing literature on returning citizens and on HCI job search. First of all, we note that returning citizens are a unique subgroup of technology users, differing in key ways from other marginalized groups. For example, returning citizens often report a Rip-Van-Winkle-like experience¹ with respect to digital technology: Having been imprisoned in an age before widespread digital infrastructure, they are befuddled to enter a world in which friends and family eagerly put a smartphone in their hands. Their experience is reminiscent of, for example, technology interaction by older adults [40], but there are salient differences. Older adults who use smartphones can be fluent with sophisticated apps and websites; this did not appear to be the case with our participants. Many older adults are literate and have good educational backgrounds; many of our participants struggled with reading. Older adults rarely worry about pre-existing content about them on the internet; for our participants, their criminal records haunted them online.

Returning citizens rely on younger family members for technical help, echoing findings with both older adults in the developed world [40] and low-literate developing-world technology users [29], but unlike the latter, who often have others dial numbers or manipulate apps on their behalf, returning citizens use digital devices themselves.

And, while returning citizens generally seem to settle into a pattern of digital technology use similar to mainstream use – communication, entertainment, online search – they exhibit a major exception: Many refrain from social media, due to parole restrictions, wariness of its temptations, or uncertainty about its value.

Our work extends prior research exploring the use of mobile phones in job search [33], as well as work citing the important role of families in reentry [22], and the importance of social support in job search [11]. We find that family and friends – when they are supportive – play an essential role in providing access to and knowledge about technology. Yet, what is taught is often at a surface level and did not cover digital skills important to job search. Unlike prior work, social support did not include providing resume feedback for example [11]. In fact, our participants rarely had or required resumes in their job search. Returning citizens also did not immediately express the need for *personal* or *societal* needs as found in prior HCI research of underserved job seekers [11], although we know that these barriers exist outside of the immediate needs that were expressed.

¹In Washington Irving's well-known story set in colonial America, Rip Van Winkle falls asleep for 20 years and wakes up to a dramatically different post-Revolution America [23].

We also confirm past research that found that returning citizens relied more on their strong ties (than weak ties [15]) to acquire and search for jobs [9, 16] (a point also found with low-income groups more generally [39]). We think this is due to the increased set of challenges faced by returning citizens which include having to acknowledge their criminal histories on job application, gaps in work history, and decimated weak ties. Strong ties seem more likely to provide additional credibility, share outside employment opportunities, or pay to utilize the skills of returning citizens though this requires additional research to confirm. We additionally speculate that these trends are exacerbated with returning citizens' low digital literacy, which would incline them toward in-person interactions. And, while digital technology could serve a role in strengthening both strong and weak ties [9, 31, 37], our finding that many returning citizens may not use social media dampens this possibility supports a potential area of opportunity for future research. Turning to recommendations, our findings *could* inform technology design – the need for web browsers that certify legitimate sites (versus ad traps); clearer indications in browsers when navigating away from a site; and combination tutorial-wizards for job-search sites that allow returning citizens to learn basic online tasks step-by-step. But, in line with other research that discourage facile notions of tech-centric support [5, 35], we focus our recommendations on the design of digital literacy training programs that would build human capacity.

We offer the following as starting points for similar programs and further research. First, digital literacy courses may benefit from being integrated with larger goals such as employment or entrepreneurship, as the latter are returning citizens' ultimate aspirations. Second, the diversity of returning citizens seems a constant, so trainings that flexibly alternate between structured pedagogy and individualized one-on-one guidance may be the most fruitful. Third, content should convey basic mental models of digital technology as a way to scaffold practical skills and more sophisticated understanding. Fourth, challenges of textual non-literacy must be considered [10]. Fifth, job search skills are worth demonstrating on both mobile and larger computing devices. Finally, with respect to internet navigation, it seems imperative to ensure that returning citizens understand spam, ads, and other online scourges. Like other groups from low-socioeconomic backgrounds [38], these issues often confounded our participants.

A key limitation of our study is that our participants were a biased sample at multiple levels. Our recruiting strategy involved working through agencies that assist returning citizens, which means that we were less likely to have interviewed those not in touch with such organizations. Those who eventually participated were the ones with support required to respond appropriately and find transportation to

meeting sites. And, the participants we reached out to for Phase II had various advantages over the others. The net result is that the conclusions we have drawn undoubtedly skew optimistic; reality is likely even starker for the majority of returning citizens.

7 CONCLUSION

Overall, we extend a call in HCI for more support for returning citizens' job search beyond providing a list of felony-friendly employers [10]. Our work can also be seen as the first response to Reisdorf & Rikard's [28] call for research to investigate the role of digital literacy in reentry. We focus on what they call the "economic field" of activity, in which employment figures prominently. Our participants' stories of personal failings inextricably interleaved with heroic perseverance humbled us with their moral complexity. And while we are aware that a few digital literacy classes will do little to counter the structural and discriminatory forces working against returning citizens, they were the first to voice a desire to learn more about technology. Ultimately, we believe that, due to the unique circumstances of their rehabilitation and vulnerability, returning citizens deserve more attention and support, both from the HCI community and beyond.

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