Digit - Episode 1: Introducing the Digit Data Observatory

Speakers: Professor Chris Forde and Dr Emma Russell

[00:00:00] **Chris:** Welcome to the Research and Innovation podcast with the Digit Data Observatory. This series is presented in conjunction with the Digital Futures at Work Research Centre (Digit), supported by the Economic and Social Research Council. Hi, I'm Chris Forde and I'm deputy director of Digit at Leeds University Business School and I'm co-leader of the Data Observatory.

[00:00:25] **Emma:** Hi, and my name's Emma Russell. I'm a Chartered and registered occupational psychologist at the University of Sussex. And I am also co-lead of the Data Observatory with Chris and co-lead of the mid and early-career researcher stream with Dimitra Petrakaki at the Digit Research Centre.

[00:00:46] **Chris:** And today in this podcast, Emma and I are going to talk to you more about the Digit Data Observatory. But to begin with, perhaps first thing we could look at Emma, is what is Digit? What is the Digit Research Centre?

[00:01:01] **Emma:** Well, Digit stands for Digital Futures at Work Research Centre, and it's an Economic and Social Research Council-funded research centre that spans a number of universities. So across the UK, that includes Sussex and Leeds, Manchester, Cambridge, and Aberdeen, and also Monash University in Australia. It's headed up by professors Jackie O'Reilly at Sussex and Mark Stuart at Leeds. I suppose, primarily what Digit aims to do, is to use research to increase understanding of how digital technologies are changing and impacting people's work and the implications that this has for workers, job seekers, organizations, governments, and society.

So, really the aim of Digit is to try and use the theoretically driven and wherever possible co-created research, to use knowledge about digital work, to engage debate and facilitate discussions, provide guidance, influence policy, and practices and help make digital working life better for everyone.

Digit organizes this around four key research themes. So the first theme looks at understanding the impact of digitalization on work and employment. This takes kind of a historical perspective really, and looks at where we've come from, where we're going, what the recent trends are and how that plays out, both in regional and national and international environments.

The second research theme looks at understanding employers' digital practices at work. This involves using a large-scale survey to try and gauge how different digital technologies are being implemented across businesses and what some of the investment decisions are for businesses and organizations in adopting and implementing these technologies.

I think the hope is there that this then can become a really useful data source in the future for other researchers to access and look at as kind of a representation of a point in time and understanding of where employers are in relation to using digital technologies across their different sectors and areas.

I guess that then links a little bit to the third theme which looks at understanding employers and employees, experiences of digital work across different sectors. So we are trying to take a relatively

broad brush approach here. For example, in the creative industries, the health sector, financial and legal service industries, how have these different industry sectors adopted digital technology? And how has that impacted work in terms of work being created, being displaced, being structured differently?

And then the final theme is understanding how to reconnect the disconnected. So this is an attempt to provide new channels of voice and representation to more disadvantaged or traditionally invisible groups within society. We are trying to understand a bit more about how digital technology can provide opportunities to people who may not have had those opportunities before, but also being very mindful of the impact of digital work on people in terms of social protections, representation, regulation, and so forth.

So those are kind of our four themes, but we also obviously have other areas at Digit that we're looking at. Don't know if you can tell us a bit about those Chris.

[00:04:38] **Chris:** As you say, that's quite a lot, quite an ambitious program, isn't it? And, themes give us, it gives it a structure around particular issues and, and you've got these sectoral differences, I think as well, which, which are really interesting. The nature of digital technology and their use at work would be quite different in some of the sectors you've identified.

There's also a range of other initiatives associated with Digit as well which link into these themes. We have an Innovation Fund each year where applicants can apply to be funded through Digit, to look at particular topics and issues.

There are six or seven of those projects each year, and that will continue throughout the remainder of Digit. These have looked at a wide range and diverse set of topics from digitalization of employment services, the use of digital technologies in social care in Scotland, robotic processes in financial services. There's a long list of issues which connect to the core themes, but also allow people to look at specific topics.

There's an open application process that people from outside of Digit can apply for the Innovation Fund. In addition to that, there's the Maria Jahoda Visiting Fellowships - obviously COVID has had an impact on the physical visits of researchers to work on this. But nonetheless, I think it's been really positive to see people funded to work on specific projects with Digit researchers on real-world problems. And again, these have looked at things as diverse as blockchain technologies, artificial intelligence and how those are reshaping the workplace. And again, there's a round of applications for those fellowships each year.

Another thing just to flag up before we move on to the Data Observatory is also something maybe you could say a little bit more about, I know you're closely involved in this is the activities in Digit around early-career and mid-career researchers.

[00:06:44] **Emma:** Yeah. So I look after that research stream with Dimitra Petrakaki, and it's really to try and provide opportunities and support for our mid and early-career researchers within and across Digit. So some of the things that we do there is trying to match MECRs as we call them up with appropriate mentors.

So we're very lucky within Digit to have such a broad range of very senior academics, up to professor level, across a wide variety of fields and disciplines who can act as mentors to our makers, both in terms of subject areas, but also methodologies and just in terms of careers, advice and so forth.

So every MECR at Digit is given the opportunity to have a mentor, which is great. we also have. A really nice series of talks, which we call the PIP series. This stands for papers in progress. So mid and early-career researchers are encouraged to talk about their research in a really kind of safe forum with other MECR present, and occasionally senior members of Digit to provide advice and guidance and how to develop their research.

We also have training opportunities, and kind of drop-in office hours where MECRs can talk to a particular senior academic about a topic of interest. So, yeah, the MECR programme seems to be quite an active program and we include doctoral researchers within that as well, who have their own little group that they're, they're very active in promoting.

So that's a bit about the MECRs. I guess your baby, Chris, is the Data Observatory. So is there anything you can, you can tell us about what the Data Observatory aims to do and what we can look forward to in the Data Observatory?

[00:08:45] **Chris:** The Data Observatory, so the aim is to provide a one-stop shop for data, evidence, and debate around digital futures at work.

As we've mentioned already, there's a lot of projects and research going on within Digit and that's gathering a huge amount of new evidence on a whole range of aspects of digital futures. So there's a need to try and disseminate that and have a place where people that they want to find out about what's happening within Digit can, access data and engage with debates and commentary around that evidence base, but also beyond Digit there's, there's a whole host of other data sources and evidence, and there's a lot of debate going on about what's happening at digital futures at work.

So we want it to provide a forum and a space where there could be engagement and discussion and debates, involving researchers from within and outside of Digit - policymakers, employers, the wider public. All of these hopefully can come and find out more about evidence and data on digital futures at work.

So within that, we've got a range of things going on within the Data Observatory. And at the moment you can, if you go onto the Digit website, you can see the blog. The blog now has about 15 blog entries. These are really short commentaries around a particular topic, looking at a particular issue, engaging with some data or evidence, but in quite a short, punchy, fashion.

And so far, these have covered a whole host of topics - artificial intelligence, technology and recruitment and selection, the right of people to disconnect from work. There's been a lot of different topics and I think, they're quite varied, they demonstrate, I think the varied research that's going on within Digit, they're using different kinds of data, and they're presented in different ways, but each of them, sort of moulded into a short, accessible blog to try and disseminate material.

The data commentaries are another aspect of the data observatory. What we're trying to do with these is provide a bit more of a deeper dive into an issue. So these provide the chance for those that

are writing to have a look in a lot more depth at an issue, engage with some of the data and, and, and explore that data in a deeper way.

And so far we've published one of these and that's by Kevin Hernandez and Becky Faith who are two Digit researchers and their data commentary is looking at measures of digital exclusion and how some of the widely used surveys to look at digital exclusion and inclusion by the Office for National Statistics and Ofcom. These surveys are very revealing in, some aspects but they do present quite binary picture of either digital inclusion or digital exclusion and it perhaps misses some of the barriers to exclusion. Perhaps there's a need for more granular questions and the use of new methodologies to explore digital exclusion and inclusion in more detail.

And they're really trying to explore that in a bit more detail in their data commentary. I perhaps don't wanna give too much away about it now, because we are pleased to say we're going to be doing another podcast with, with Kevin and Becky looking more specifically at this issue and their data commentary. But you can look at this on the, the website, the data commentary is available, and it is hopefully the first of many data commentaries that we'll have over the course of Digit, providing a bit of a deeper analysis into an issue.

[00:12:37] **Emma:** Yeah, I think what was really nice about the data commentary is the way it provides this, I suppose it's like a contemporary barometer of what's happening at the moment and quite by chance, just to, just as that data commentary was being published Ofcom then updated some of their statistics on how they report and measure, digital exclusion.

But I think because we had that commentary in place, because it was such an in-depth analysis and look at the way in which these measures have been taken before it enabled then Becky and Kevin to respond to immediately to these new approaches used by Ofcom. They were able to very distinctively say whether Ofcom was addressing some of the issues that they had highlighted in their commentary and what, what more Ofcom needed to do about it.

So, yeah, I think, I think the data commentaries are a really nice way of providing that extra bit of analysis. Whereas perhaps the blogs are a neat, simple kind of condensing of people's research, isn't it?

[00:13:40] **Chris:** Yeah, so there were a number of other areas on the data observatory site as well. Some of these aren't heavily populated yet, but they're things that we will be developing content for over the coming months and years.

There will be a link to Digit data, on the Data Observatory. Most of the data will be archived, ultimately, through the UK Data Service and we'll provide the links to that archive from the Data Observatory site, so that it's clear if they want to access the raw data from, the employer survey that we're doing, or from individual projects, both qualitative and quantitative data, they can find a link of where to do this.

There will be some delays in this in some cases the archiving process, taking place, it varies from project to project, but it is an aspiration and a goal of a Digit to make the data that's been generated available for secondary access and for people to look at it. And then there will be links to do that to the UK data service on the data observatory.

We also hope to conduct short, what we might call pulse surveys, trying to get a quick understanding of a particular issue using a short survey, and we hope to do a number of these over the next two years in Digit. They might, for example, look at the experience of workers in the platform economy, or look at dialogue and involvement around the implementation of digital technologies in the workplace.

It's something that we hope to do, alongside the more substantial employer survey to have some short pulse style surveys on a particular topic area. And alongside that, they'll also be additional resources and guides to analysis that's been undertaken, during Digit, and the Digit data management manual as well, where there's guidance on conducting research on digital futures at work and, converse issues around ethics, storing data and other things. So over time, we're hoping this will build into a one-stop-shop for people to come to access data and evidence and debate around digital futures at work. And we hope people will find the materials useful.

I should say we always, we also welcome contributions from people, not just Digit researchers, but if people are interested in writing a blog for Digit or a commentary we're very happy to have a discussion with you about possible ideas. And there's further guidance about that on the Digit website.

I might ask you the question, Emma, about why, why all this is important. Why do we really need it? A data observatory? This research is going on - it might be disseminated in academic journals, for example, at conferences. Why do we need a data observatory to try and bring all this together?

[00:16:43] **Emma:** Well, I think we're right in saying there isn't at the moment, a comprehensive unified forum where academic research, policy discussions and debates and practice guidance in relation to digital work can be found. So I think what Digit offers is a very broad and accessible setting for bringing together knowledge on digital futures at work, and informing ethical relevant programs of research and practice. So I think what we hope from the data observatory at Digit is that it will be useful to digital research communities, but also to workers and organizations and think tanks, policy units, and many other stakeholders, to come to be able to find the latest state of the art research on digital futures, but also discussion and debate around the topic. So I think we see Digit and the data observatory as really a kind of rich platform for engaging and stimulating important agendas in relation to digital futures at work.

[00:17:58] **Chris:** Yeah I'd agree with that. I think it's providing access isn't it, to the information, try stimulate some debate and discussion. And hopefully there'll be some training and skills development opportunities through there as well with materials that we might put up there, which will give people a better understanding of a particular methodology or approach to researching an issue.

I found it really useful, talking with those that we've helped write blogs with and commentaries to understand the approaches that they've been adopting and the methods that they've used to try and explore a topic in a, in a bit more detail.

[00:18:39] **Emma:** Yeah, I think as well you're right. Yeah, I think we see Digit as something that's very inclusive and that we would want people both within and beyond the research community to feel that they can use Digit as a place to connect with people who have similar interests and a similar desire to, to improve work in life for people, through digital research.

So, yeah. So with so much going on in the Data Observatory, Chris, what would you say are some of the challenges of leading this observatory?

[00:19:10] **Chris:** That's a really good question. I think that the biggest thing is just the scope of research that's going on within Digit. There is, as you say, there's four themes. There's a lot of different projects and research - qualitative and quantitative. So it's just trying to make sure that the Data Observatory can do justice to that depth and breadth of research.

And I've certainly enjoyed doing the groundwork on this and talking to people who are producing content for the Data Observatory, the blogs, or the commentary. Explore the ideas with them, and to discuss with them about how that might be articulated or visualized in an accessible way to get it out to as wide an audience as possible.

The Data Observatory is still at quite an early stage at the moment. So we've got the blogs and we've got one commentary on there. The Digit data management manual as well. But as we've both said, there will be much more to come over the coming months and years as well. So there are challenges I think to doing that, but it's been a very enjoyable process and I really enjoy looking at the research and the ideas that are coming out of Digit and getting that across in the Data Observatory.

[00:20:29] **Emma:** I think it's really noticeable just how wide the variety of research and researchers are at Digit and how fortunate we are to be able to work with people from so many different domains. And all of the externals as well, that we've been able to connect with through Maria Jahoda and the Innovation Fund has really, I think, enriched the centre.

So yeah, the challenge of course, as you say, is trying to organize that in a way that's accessible and does justice to the variety of people involved.

[00:21:01] **Chris:** Definitely. Thanks, Emma. We'll leave it there for now. We really hope you've enjoyed this podcast and there will be a link to the data observatory in the show notes accompanying this podcast and you can visit our Digit website and the data observatory area in there to find out more about what's happening.

We really hope that this has stimulated your interest in finding out more about Digit. And please do look out for further podcasts and content in the future. Thanks very much from me for listening today.

[00:21:38] **Emma:** And thanks very much from me as well.