Falling off the bandwagon?

We live in a technological world with an ageing population. So how do we ensure that older people get connected — and stay connected — in a way that is meaningful for them?

Services such as the internet, email and digital TV have rapidly become central to our society. For older people, this technology has the potential to support independent living, promote social inclusion, and improve access to commercial and government services. For this to work, older people need to be ‘digitally engaged’.

But getting online is only half the battle. Once the initial excitement of connection has passed, older users’ newfound confidence can be eroded very rapidly by the early challenges of coping with the technology at home.

If older people are to become confident participants and contributors in the digital world, they need an ongoing and reliable service that supports them and meets their wide-ranging needs.

“Access to the internet is now so important to every aspect of life in Britain it could become a human right.” — Francis Maude in the Daily Telegraph, 27 April 2013

Key messages

1. There has been a great deal of emphasis on getting people online, both in the UK and across the world. But persuading older people to go online may be easy compared with keeping them there long-term, because they face barriers which can quickly erode their confidence. These include:
   - physical changes: e.g. eyesight, hand dexterity, mobility
   - psychological and cognitive changes: e.g. confidence, memory
   - social changes: e.g. family members moving away
   - technology changes: e.g. new versions of familiar things

2. In 2004, the UK Government’s Digital Inclusion Panel warned of a real medium-term risk that significantly more citizens will migrate from being digitally engaged to being disengaged than the other way round (Digital Inclusion Panel report 2004, p.79). Since the report, evidence of this migration is growing.

3. Keeping older people digitally engaged has wide-ranging benefits to them. It also reduces the call on public services (cost savings) and opens up a market for online commerce, entertainment, and communication. Added to this, as younger people who have used digital technologies as an integral part of their lives become older or impaired in some way, they will still expect to enjoy the social and economic benefits of digital engagement. They will demand it as a basic right.

4. This issue is not being tackled, except for some notable local projects. There is already strong investment in bringing older people through the ‘entry barrier’ to become internet users (Race Online, Go-On, Silver Surfers, ITea & Biscuits, and so on). But keeping people engaged relies on unstable funding regimes, fragmented efforts and goodwill. And since the factors which cause people to become disengaged are highly varied, there is no silver bullet.

5. Many older people prefer to learn new skills in a social setting that provides accessible, readily-available ICT support and that enables them to live their lives to the full. And people are motivated to learn new skills when they find them rewarding because they enable them to pursue their passions and interests, such as researching a family tree or taking part in a local history project.
Policy implications

The key messages in this briefing paper arise from research led by Loughborough University, in conjunction with seven other universities, which involved more than a thousand older people across the UK.

What older people want

Learning and support that...
- is readily available, trusted and sustained
- is delivered in familiar, welcoming and local venues
- is embedded in social activities and personal interests
- is free of time pressure and assessments
- includes problem-solving and troubleshooting
- offers impartial advice and ‘try before you buy’

What is required

1. ICT support hubs which are embedded in the community. These would provide flexible and adaptable learning to match older people’s range of needs, learning speeds and styles. Reflecting local needs and assets, these clubs would offer free, independent, trusted advice in a ‘clinic’ or ‘helpline’ style, offering advice on choosing products and software, and supporting learning at all levels.

2. Hubs which use existing community venues. Drop-in centres, clubhouses, schools, pubs and shops are already embedded in local communities. Informal and welcoming, they would offer opportunities to learn new skills in a familiar setting. Locally run, with guidance from users, each hub would be whatever and wherever the community wanted it to be.

3. Hubs which offer valuable ICT help focused on users’ own needs and interests. Older people would benefit from support in healthcare and telecare services; internet banking; online safety and security; shopping online and on the high street; renewing vehicle licences; paying bills; and so on. New skills acquired in this context would be purposeful and immediately useful.

4. Hubs which allow users to share knowledge and swap tips. Users could help each other sort out problems with technological and assistive devices, all within a relaxed, social atmosphere and working with like-minded people.

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