

TECHSENIOR

TECHNOLOGY FOR ASSISTING SENIORS

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CONTENTS

Benefits.....	2
Motivation	3
What motivates older people to learn technology?	4
Some aspects of our research	4
Quick benefits for the learner - inclusion	5
Motivational benefits	5
What do older people learn?.....	6
Managing transitions and change	6
Developing interests, curiosity and knowledge	7
Varied motivations are reflected in the following quotes:	7
Examples in powerpoint (marketing)	8

Benefits

Many older people are deterred by technology and are therefore missing the social interaction it can deliver. Many older people believe they don't understand technology, aren't equipped to deal with it, and don't really need to: technology is for the young, not for them. Older people are fully capable of learning to use technology and find that they are interested in doing so provided they are made aware of its benefits and receive adequate training and support.

IT (Information Technology) can help prevent and alleviate social isolation and loneliness among older people. To realise the potential inherent in these technologies, older people can be empowered by educating themselves about communications technology and the benefits it can bring. With the right support, older people will have the ability to become part of the solution, for example, by participating in peer-to-peer support schemes.

The project partners recognise that there needs to be help and assistance in order for older people to appreciate what technology can do for them. This means tuning in to their interests, attitudes and expectations. Understanding what might motivate an older person to learn is important. The belief that technology is a good thing per se doesn't necessarily exist amongst older people. They need to have its value demonstrated in concrete terms, with direct application to their lives – for example, enabling them to connect to family members living on the other side of the globe using Skype.

Lifelong education enables older people to gain self-confidence, show their creativity, and share their skills and experience.

Recognition in the retirement age is not intended to obtain professional and future employment; however learning technology can help with obtaining work or volunteering. Older people mostly do not relate to the old age as a period filled with new meaning, a new socio-psychological state, and a new position; they want to continue with their rhythm and pace of life. However, the inability to preserve their existing position can cause dissatisfaction, social isolation, and alienation.

Lifelong learning becomes a special need for older adults to learn of their rights and clarifying their responsibilities, taking responsibility for their own destiny. Older people require knowledge, competence for healthcare, skills for daily activities, hobbies, social work, and help with maintaining preservation of intergenerational relations, not just with their families.

The internet has already become an integral part of life and an irreplaceable means of communication. However, not all are able to take full advantage of Internet technologies. Older people, for example, are often unable to participate in the social networks, e-mail, and other attributes of the on-line world. This project and the training it will deliver aims to address this.

Technology can enable older people to renew or develop social contacts and actively engage in their communities. It can help prevent older people from becoming socially isolated and lonely because of life changes including retirement, bereavement, a deterioration in health. And it can help those who are socially isolated escape their situation. The technology available offers quick and relatively cheap contact with colleagues, friends and relatives across the globe.

The previous module covered important aspects of how to train older people; this module looks at how older people might be motivated to learn, in general terms.

Motivation

As already mentioned in Module 1, it is highly important to keep up and promote the motivation of elders during teaching and training.

Technology is becoming a bigger part of everyone's life, making it easier for people to:

- maintain contact with family, friends and a wider group of individuals with whom they have something in common, such as work, hobbies or common experiences
- gain access to information about activities and services that meet their interests and needs
- learn new skills, keeping their brains active; helps people keep up and adapt
- engage in paid work and volunteering
- find the best prices for products and services; have shopping delivered.

Without the technology that benefits an increasing majority of the population, older people do not have access to the same information and opportunities as their younger peers. They may as a result begin to feel over time that they have less in common with younger people and other members of the community. Quite simply, they lack the same opportunities and begin to feel more isolated as they find younger people talking about things they simply about which they have no knowledge or experience.

Finding the right motivation for engaging older people is important; individuals vary obviously, so being aware of the many motivating factors is important for teachers and trainers.

What motivates older people to learn technology?

Some aspects of our research

The research carried out by the project covered some ideas that are useful for motivating older people. The most noticeable was to find the relevance to the older person; some hints and tips for this are given below, but each trainer will also find their own motivators.

Motivation is enhanced if the learners feel it is relevant to them (find their interests – this will differ with each person or group). The desire to improve one's wellbeing is a strong motivator for learning.

Specific examples, told by way of a story, will mean more to older people than a simple list. The powerpoint presentation that goes along with this guide also uses some stories and graphics, both of which are useful and meaningful to older people. However, the simple list below is a good starting point.

- Safe use of the internet – it scares people (this is covered in Module 3)
- Retention, remembering passwords is a problem; patience and repetition very useful in the 'teacher'/volunteer
- Photo attaching and deleting
- Touchscreen is easier for many people
- Good to use their own tablet/laptop/phone
- Sensory deficiencies need to be taken into account (auditory and visual)
- Easy to see graphic indicators are helpful
- Overcome nervousness: patience, calm, consistency
- Easy exercises to start
- Relevance to older people
- Nervousness, social aspects of training
- Attitude of trainer
- Speed of learning

Other aspects for the trainer to consider, whilst thinking about motivation:

- Create a calm atmosphere by being patient and consistent
- Start with easy exercises that motivate: writing to a grandchild, including a drawing and a text from Internet
- Social interaction is good motivation

Quick benefits for the learner - inclusion

- Independence
- Creating and maintaining social networks, keeping connected – family, friends, news, outside world
- Practical – shopping, doctor appointments
- Sense of achievement/self-esteem
- Social network
- Reduces loneliness and isolation (opportunity to make new friends)
- Social (bring a friend along too, doing something together)
- Empowerment
- Independent living

Studies show that retired people especially those aged between 55 and 70 years want to acquire new knowledge in the field of psychology, culture, science, languages. It is said that the age is rather a state of mind and depends on the character but the aspiration to study and develop abilities remain in human life for a long time.

Older adults want to be active, socially demanding, to promote the welfare for others. Information technology should and can improve the quality of elderly people's life.

For the majority of elderly people, life is an intellectual adventure. Knowledge can be accessed via the Internet and the media, as well as via specialised organisations for older students. In the UK, for example, there is the Open University and University of the Third Age (U3A). Hopefully, TECHSenior can add to these options.

The ability to adapt to rapidly changing innovations declines with age, especially with the retirement and at the same time there is a great loss of a large number of social contacts. Today the use of information technology is a necessary condition for an older person to adapt to society, it improves the quality of life.

Motivational benefits

Some examples from our research:

- Developing myself as a person
- Meeting new people, and making new friends

- Improving my communication skills
- Improving my self confidence
- Enjoying learning more

What do older people learn?

As people age, and especially around the time of retirement, they become less interested in qualification and vocational courses, and scientific subjects, and increasingly interested in studying the humanities and social sciences. Some research shows a peak in interest in languages around 60 (when people retiring embark on foreign travel, and some move abroad), and in computer related skills in the late 60s (when a generation seek to catch up with the opportunities offered by the online world).

Managing transitions and change

One key function of adult learning is helping people to manage life transitions, both the predictable, like retirement, and the more uncertain, like bereavement, moving house and entering residential care (which is often sudden and unplanned). In some cases, it can be targeted specifically at such needs, as with pre-retirement education, but more often it provides a secure and non-judgemental place where people can build new social support networks with other people around shared interests.

One important, and almost universal, feature of later life is the loss of social support, and most severely the loss of a spouse or partner. Where roles within the relationship have been fairly rigidly defined, this can leave the survivor facing serious and urgent learning needs if they are to remain independent. Examples include bereaved men who cannot cook, and bereaved women with no experience of managing money, or basic DIY (home repair) skills.

Digital technologies have a particular role to play in helping those in sheltered or residential care to overcome isolation, and a recent study of their use in sheltered housing sheds detailed light on the issues. The pattern for residents reflected that for older learners generally: although half had access to computers and to other digital technologies, levels of confidence were low, and use was often very limited.

However, motivation to learn was strong. Residents hoped to use them for keeping in touch with friends and relatives, pursuing interests and hobbies, making better use of public services, meeting new people, finding local events, and saving money. Such training can have very distinct benefits, including: increased voluntary activity; improved wellbeing (social engagement, health management,

and confidence in taking decisions); greater control and choice in use of public services; more informed decisions on spending on goods and services, and stimulating self-organised group learning. However, most learners were not confident that they could continue to develop their skills without continuing support.

The aide-memoire (e-learning) which will be created by this project offers on-going support to these and others.

Developing interests, curiosity and knowledge

One major motivation for learning is the desire to pursue interests, and simply to increase knowledge, often described as 'learning for its own sake'. This may be part of a long term interest, a personal learning project which may run over a number of years, or an exploratory venture into a new field. Self-organised provision plays a particularly strong role here, with U3A groups pursuing a very wide range of topics, for very varying lengths of time, and at varying academic levels. Older learners are particularly likely to be studying the arts and humanities, including practical learning associated with art, musical and drama groups.

Varied motivations are reflected in the following quotes:

"Well my granddaughter has just got a job working on a ship cruising the Caribbean and if I don't hear from her for a few days I start worrying, because she has never left home. I send her an email and say answer me straight away and next day I have a reply. It's fantastic" (June aged 76).

"I suppose of late, my favourite occupation has become that of producing my Family Tree....It has become the most compelling thing I've undertaken with IT technologies; finding sites of place names, their origins and looking for yet more leads to family" (Mike aged 59).

"Well, I was dragged kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century. I was very reluctant because I am petrified of new technology. But with a lot of persuasion, primarily from my GP who thought I would enjoy it, it would stimulate me, I eventually bought one" (Mary aged 61).

Examples in powerpoint (marketing)

The powerpoint presentation that accompanies these notes shows some examples of motivators and these should be viewed as part of the marketing to encourage older people to learn technology; trainers and teachers should be able to think of others.

Real examples mean more to people.

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