

Older people and digital engagement

Older people not only represent a growing proportion of society, they are also the fastest growing group of internet users. This trend will be reinforced with new retirees who have ICT skills acquired in the workplace, and because initiatives by Government and other organisations (e.g. Age UK's 'Silver Surfers') are successfully converting older non-users into users.

In the course of the Sus-IT project we have surveyed around 750 older people (aged 50+) to explore the nature and extent of their digital engagement, and to understand the benefits and challenges that they have experienced with their use of digital technologies. The majority of participants in the survey were recruited from existing groups and panels of older people. Sus-IT has worked collaboratively with 24 groups/panels of older people across the UK, in particular from the East and West Midlands, London, Surrey, Teesside and Dundee. We have sought to reach older adults in all their 'diversity', in terms of health and wellbeing, socially, economically, culturally and in terms of race and ethnicity. Two 'waves' of data collection were undertaken with different selection criteria for participants. In the first 'wave' there were no exclusion criteria other than being aged 50+. In the second 'wave' we focused on older experienced computer users. In addition to being aged 50+, participants were required to have used a computer for two years or more. Both surveys were questionnaire based and included both closed and open ended questions; a modified version of the questionnaire was developed to use with participants with low literacy levels.

The first survey was carried out during 2009-2010. This survey focused on the use of technology by older people in their everyday lives. Our findings showed that older people were using a wide range of digital devices. Almost everyone was using at least one digital technology, with around a third using between 2-5 technologies each and two thirds using 6-10 different technologies. The most frequently used digital technology was the mobile phone (used by almost 90% of respondents). Nearly 70% of respondents reported using a computer. Participants varied however in their confidence levels in using digital technologies. While nearly all were confident users of technologies such as CD players and digital television, and with the basic functions of the mobile phone, confidence levels tended to be lower for 'advanced' functions of the phone e.g. internet access. Most computer users said they were confident when surfing the internet or using features such as word processing to create documents but were less so when they used functions such as Skype and iPlayer. Some users said that they had difficulties operating the newer technologies or found it hard to remember how to use them.

Despite varying confidence levels, many respondents were not only enjoying the benefits of being online, but saw computers and internet access as a central, important or even essential part of their lives.

Data from the second 'wave' of the survey, focusing on established computer users, enabled us to investigate in more detail the ways in which older people are using computers and the internet and the challenges that they face.

Findings from this second survey show that a large proportion of respondents report using a desktop computer every day or several times a week (71%). Survey results also show

that although small numbers of participants use a tablet or a mobile phone to access the internet, over half of those who do use these devices do so every day or several times a week. For instance 9% of participants reported using a tablet device, of these 57% report using it every day or several times a week and 9% of participants report using a mobile phone to access the internet, of these 76% report using it every day or several times a week.

Many older respondents described graphically the benefits of 'digital connection' that they perceive in their lives and often stress the social benefits of staying in touch with family and friends over the internet – especially when faced with reduced mobility or geographical separation from them. That they perceive the computer to be a key determinant of the quality of their lives is evidenced by their responses to the question 'How would you feel if you had to stop using the computer. Many respondents replied in emotive terms such as 'devastated', 'alone', 'isolated', powerless and 'loss of independence'.

Some of the most commonly-faced challenges reported are associated with changes in physical capabilities (e.g. dexterity), cognitive capabilities (most commonly impaired memory), support and technology changes and technical difficulties.

There are differences between the reality and the perceived causes of loss of capacity to use ICTs. While statistics show that muscular-skeletal problems are the most likely disability to cause people to stop using their computers (Young et al., 2012), the perception of most older ICT users is that losing their eyesight is the most probable cause of cessation of use of computers. Almost a third of survey respondents stated deteriorating eyesight as the reason which they **believe** is most likely to lead to them to abandon use of the computer.

Important points/conclusions

In relation to sustaining digital engagement by older users, our data lead us to conclude that:

1. Some older people reveal **exceptional tenacity in attempts to remain digitally connected**. often persisting in the face of many obstacles posed by age-related changes (e.g. changes in physical ability, memory, support, and/or technology problems/changes). Awareness of the interrelationship between social inclusion and digital inclusion from the perspective of personal experience may be an important part of the explanation for this.
2. There appears to be a strong consensus among many older ICT users that they prefer their **use of ICTs to be a social process** in which knowledge and experience are shared, relationships nurtured, communication enjoyed – often intergenerational, hobbies and interests pursued, technical problems are resolved – and ICT purchasing options are debated and discussed. This consensus has informed the development of a blue-print for sustainable, community-based ICT learning and support provision.
3. Key determinants of 'the ICT user experience' – and of the likelihood of older people being able to continue using technologies in the face of age-related capability changes are **access to help and support** and the **adequacy of design** of hardware and software.