

Engaging older people in research and design

An underpinning principle in the philosophy of the NDA is the engagement of older people as active participants in research – in contrast to being passive research ‘subjects’. In Sus-IT they have been a core part of our research community. More than 1000 older people from diverse backgrounds across the UK have participated in our project in some way. To engage and empower them – and thus build capacity in this community – a range of different methods of engagement have been developed and applied. Collectively these comprise a tool kit for engaging older people in research. The components are described below.

Working collaboratively with older people in established groups and communities of older people

In order to reach older adults in all their ‘diversity’, in terms of health and wellbeing, socially, economically, culturally and in terms of race and ethnicity, Sus-IT researchers have worked collaboratively with 24 established groups and communities of older people in the Midlands, Dundee, London, Surrey and Newcastle. A range of different activities and events have been undertaken with the different groups, depending on their interests. The aim has been to inform and engage older people with the Sus-IT research topic, to encourage their active participation. User engagement has been achieved in many cases through ‘gate-keepers’ responsible for provision of computer support or formal computer classes. Regular updates about project progress have been given to participants, e.g. through a periodic newsletter, along with sessions to present emerging findings and the outcomes of the project and to invite feedback from participants. Participants have found engagement with these events and activities rewarding. For example, one said:

“It is great to be involved in something that will make a difference to older people’s lives.”
(Mark, aged 67)

In March 2010, Sus-IT hosted an ESRC Festival of Social Sciences event for older adults and representatives from statutory and non-statutory organisations. The festival event ‘Improving everyday life: getting connected to public services’ was organized for residents from across the borough of Erewash over the age of 50 to come along to find out about the benefits of engaging with digital technologies. Case studies of the personal journeys of the digital engagement of five older people were collated and presented at the event and are also captured in a brochure produced for the event. Local Government and businesses were provided with an opportunity to demonstrate their services and show people how to access them online. Feedback about the event, both from older people themselves and from the organisations involved, was very positive.

Digital Engagement Study

A Digital Engagement Study of approximately 750 older people has been undertaken. This has generated new knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of ageing in relation to changing of ICT use and development. The focus is on how older people use digital technologies in everyday life, rather than on the technology itself. It proved necessary to devise a number of survey instruments to accommodate varying levels of literacy and wellbeing. The questionnaire was administered interactively in a supported process. Older people from the 24 groups identified above have completed the questionnaire.

Co-design workshops (‘sandpits’)

‘Sandpits’ were used to encourage effective engagement of older people in ICT design. These provided opportunities to explore current and emerging technologies in a playful and creative context

through the use of technology demonstrators. The objectives were: to create awareness among older people of emerging ICT; to provide a supportive and empowering approach to participation; to help them envisage potential implications of these technologies in their lives; and identify key issues and user requirements for the older market to inform the development work of ICT designers.

A series of four linked sandpits were developed and hosted to enable older people to experience 'hands on' use of demonstrators, dramatic enactment of scenarios of demonstrator use and the redesign of the demonstrators through co-design sessions. The themes of the sandpits included 'Supporting memory and identity in later life' and 'Combating social isolation with new technology'.

A total of 66 participants were involved across the four sandpits and participants varied in terms of their marital status, education and occupation etc. Participants reported the 'sandpit' experience to be rewarding and worthwhile. For example one said:

"I think it's good to have to think right through something instead of just saying "I would like"... it makes you think all round the problem, which is very good, lateral thinking."

(Amelia, aged 68)

Interactive Forum Theatre

This method gives older people opportunities to explore aspects of current and emerging technologies in an entertaining and engaging format. It uses drama techniques to elicit user requirements through a combination of dramatic enactment of future scenarios and 'hands-on' engagement with working demonstrations. This can be done in live theatre or, where a lower cost option is necessary, by use of DVDs instead. At the end of the theatre production actors enter (in character) and participate in a question and answer session. This is a powerful way of raising awareness of issues, eliciting requirements and generating feedback for developers, designers and manufacturers.

Problem-solving workshops

This approach has been used to address ICT learning and support issues identified by Sus-IT and other related research. A range of relevant stakeholders were brought together in workshops to share knowledge, engage in focused problem-solving and co-produce specific outputs. These workshops were structured to provide documented outcomes (statements of user requirements and a user-generated strategy for sustainable ICT learning and support for older users of new technologies and a plan to achieve implementation).

Testing/evaluating software and hardware

A small sample of older people has also been involved in testing and evaluating the software "adaptivity framework" developed by the project.

A toolkit for engaging older people in research and design

To assist researchers in providing a rewarding experience for participants while also gaining valid data, a guidance document has been developed which includes the following:

- approach and recruitment of research participants
- introducing and explaining the research task
- ethical aspects : participant rights, written consent, data protection and confidentiality issues
- the importance of (a) on-going support throughout the study (b) a de-briefing session and (c) feedback on outcomes/findings.

The set of techniques described above, together with this guidance document, represent a toolkit for engaging participatively, sensitively and ethically with older people in research and design.