

Older people's ICT learning and support needs

As part of a survey of older peoples' digital engagement carried out by the Sus-IT project, we asked participants to indicate which learning and support mechanisms they had used, and how they would prefer ICT learning and support to be delivered. In addition, we carried out a small survey of existing ICT learning and support provision in a sample of UK towns and cities. Case studies of three different ICT learning models also allowed us to examine in more detail the learning opportunities and experiences of older people.

Current learning and support mechanisms

Respondents reported using a wide range of learning mechanisms, including self-directed learning (54%), inter-generational learning, peer-to-peer learning (40%) and taught classes (47%). Respondents reported heavy reliance on support from family members or friends both to learn and to solve problems. Around a quarter of respondents said that human support and encouragement was the most important thing to help them use technology successfully. Formalised, qualification-based learning provision is not what many older ICT users want. Respondents expressed a preference for learning that is:

- accessible
- timely
- affordable
- tailored
- local
- in a welcoming and safe environment.

Barriers to learning

Typically, these include lack of confidence and fear of using ICT's, the absence of adequate support, varied provision and quality of ICT training, the high cost of training, memory problems, problems with understanding technical jargon and dealing with pop-ups and spam. Some of these barriers reduce in impact with growing familiarity with ICT's but some persist, for example problems with updates, viruses, poorly designed software and hardware, inadequate support, and difficulties with finding on-going ICT learning provision (i.e. intermediate courses). In addition, physical and cognitive changes such as reduced manual dexterity or vision, and impaired short-term memory may pose older people with new barriers to sustaining ICT use over time.

Motivation to remain digitally connected

Older adults value the role of ICTs in keeping them in touch with family and friends, using the internet for information searching, for hobbies and interests (such as researching family history), and to make the mechanics of daily life easier (such as online banking, shopping online, writing letters, and financial budgeting). Our research shows that once people are doing what matters to them, they begin to embrace learning, find the experience rewarding and are therefore likely to be motivated to continue.

Provision of ICT learning opportunities

A survey of ICT training and learning opportunities for older people in a sample of seven UK towns and cities showed that provision is very patchy. Findings indicate that the number of ICT training courses exclusively available for older adults is limited, and information about ICT training opportunities is generally poorly publicised. Added to this, most ICT learning and support initiatives are focussed on helping people to get online rather than providing on-going learning and support opportunities, yet Sus-IT research identifies that timely, accessible and appropriate support is a crucial factor in helping many older ICT users to stay connected. Government initiatives such as UK Online Centres do not always translate to ICT classes at a local level as intended. Funding cuts are affecting provision (for example, a key resource, the UK Online learning support site my.guide is being reduced to a tutorial repository).

Good practice in learning provision

From a literature review and analysis of 103 publications, and from empirical studies carried out on the Sus-IT project, a number of existing examples of good practice in models for learning have been identified. Good practice in meeting the vast diversity of learning needs of older people (reflecting the heterogeneity of the older population) is characterised by the capacity to offer a high degree of flexibility and tailoring the way support and learning opportunities are delivered to individual needs. Community settings such as drop-in centres/club houses appear to offer a wide variety of forms of provision. People come to these venues to get support and to work together.

A specification for improved learning and support provision

In two workshops hosted by KT-EQUAL, older people, academics and other key stakeholders documented the needs of older ICT users and how to meet them in a specification to inform nationwide provision. This specification has informed the development of a 'blueprint' which describes the essential operational elements that need to be in place to create and sustain community-based ICT learning and support services. This 'blueprint' is not a 'one size for all' approach. It does not prescribe how those essential elements should be achieved as it recognises the need for flexible approaches so that local needs can be addressed most effectively and that makes effective use of existing local opportunities. The "blueprint" considers the essential features under four headings:

1. venues – the characteristics and infrastructure that locations should have
2. services – the range and quality of services and the skills of workers
3. affordability – the options for funding
4. values – the defining the culture of the service.

Crucially, the 'blueprint' and delivery models are founded on the principle that if older people are to sustain successful use of ICTs as they age, learning to use ICTs should be a social process that is fun, relevant and tailored to their needs as older adults.

A fuller description of the workshop process and the 'blueprint' specification is available in the document 'Taming the Dragon: making technology work for us', available from the KT-EQUAL website: www.equal.ac.uk