

Risks and challenges to digital engagement

The rewards and benefits of digital engagement for older people are well established. Participants in the Sus-IT project highlight the prominent role that computers and the internet play in their lives. For example:

“The computer is my lifeline. Access to the world and contact with my family, online banking, expenditure, spreadsheets, research..... the list is endless.” (Julie, aged 67)

“The computer is one of the 5 C’s in my life – the others being children, car, church and cat.” (Howard, aged 78)

Many high-profile initiatives and programmes have succeeded in bringing more of this age group online in recent years. Research into the dynamics of ageing is making clear the range of physical, psychological and social changes that take place with increasing age, and for some people these affect their capacity to sustain digital engagement. As a result, it has been predicted that, just as more older people are becoming digitally engaged, others will be obliged to give up using their computers and become ‘digitally disengaged’ as a consequence of such changes. Evidence from previous studies suggests that between 5-10% of computer users may be judged to have given up or ‘disengaged’ at some point. Yet, in comparison to the interest and investment in promoting digital engagement amongst older people, to date there has been little research aimed at understanding the dynamics of usage for this group of users and how these are affected by changes in capabilities, circumstances and technology.

Consequences of digital disengagement by older people

If disengagement does occur, the implications are potentially serious both at the individual and at the socio-economic level. As individuals, current users expressed strong negative feelings about how they would feel if they had to give up using their computers. For example:

“Very upset - it’s my window on the world. It helps me with my interests and hobbies. I’d be giving up much more than just a computer.” (Marcia, aged 76)

“If I had to give up using a computer I would be devastated, completely cut off from the world.” (Alun, aged 81)

Not only may the well-being and independence of older people be affected if they become unable to sustain their use of computers, but their participation and inclusion in society is also threatened. This is especially the case as service delivery increasingly migrates to online channels and government services in the UK are aiming to become ‘digital by default’. Savings that are anticipated from such moves are likely to be seriously over-estimated and equally, there is likely to be under-estimation of the substantial costs and resources needed to support those who cannot access services online. In view of the significance for individuals and society, there is a compelling case to improve understanding of the phenomenon of digital disengagement by older people. This has been the central focus of the Sus-IT project.

Risk factors for digital disengagement

Previous research has found that the key reasons for giving up include disability, complexity of the technology, and social isolation (lower income and lower educational levels are also factors). While such problems can of course affect people of any age in society, they are more prevalent in the older population, suggesting that older computer users may be more likely to face challenges that will make them give up using their computers. Data collected in the Sus-IT Digital Engagement study confirms that many older computer users experience problems, and that often a combination of problems is reported.

The most common factor which participants reported to hamper their use of the computer is a lack of comprehension and/or sufficient ICT skills to understand the task being undertaken or to understand what went wrong when a problem was encountered (18.3%). A sizeable proportion of participants (12.5%) reported problems in using either the mouse, keyboard or seeing the screen - making their use of the computer difficult.

A tenth of participants reported problems in using specific software programs (10.5%) and around a further tenth of participants (8.5%) reported understanding technical terminology as making their use of the computer difficult. Other problems reported included problems in using hardware (6.5%), a lack of support available when something goes wrong (6%) along with using security/spyware software and dealing with viruses (5.2%), navigating the computer's operating system (5.2%) and dealing with pop-ups and spam (4.6%).

Despite experiencing challenges and problems, it is evident that older people are often exceptionally tenacious in trying to remain digitally connected – persisting in the face of many obstacles, and often without making use of the existing aids to accessibility. It appears that older users who are enjoying the benefits of being online are not only very reluctant to give up, but also to acknowledge when they are struggling. Disengagement is often a gradual process rather than an event, influenced by a combination of factors; age-related changes in physical or cognitive capacity are compounded by inadequate skills or support, and technological complexity.

Mitigating the risk factors for disengagement

Promoting awareness and uptake of existing aids to accessibility may help older users to sustain their use of computers or to use them more effectively, as will improvements in the design of ICT-based products and services to make them easier to use, more accessible and avoiding unnecessary complexity. Older people themselves cite support related factors as the most important thing to help them to use technology successfully. More specifically, human help and encouragement (i.e. friends, family, and tutors) is found to be the most preferred method of support, followed by the availability and provision of help in classes/drop in centres.

Role of older people in identifying and developing solutions

Older people have been core participants throughout the research process to identify solutions to prevent or postpone disengagement. They have actively participated in sandpits to shape design of future ICTs, evaluation and testing of software, and problem solving workshops to specify their requirements for provision of ICT learning and support.