Older Adults and the Internet

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Older Adults and the Internet

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.01 Older Adults and the Net (return to index)

Older adults may not have grown up with personal computers in their schools, homes and libraries, but many are discovering the utility and joy of the Internet during their later years. In fact, according to the National Telecommunications and Information Agency and other research data, people 50 years and older are a fast-growing segment of the Internet-using population. In 2001, 37.1 percent of people in this age group reported using the Internet, compared with only 19.3 percent in 1998. [1] That’s a 92 percent increase over a few short years.

However, Internet use is more concentrated on the younger end of the “over-50” continuum. In general, the older someone happens to be, the less likely he or she is to be a regular user of computers or the Internet. One study in September 2000 reported that 87 percent of people 65 years and older did not have Internet access. [2] This is not necessarily due to economic factors (i.e., not being able to afford the technology or Internet Service Provider fees), although that is sometimes the case. More likely it has to do with lack of adequate training, unfamiliarity with computer technology, and uncertainty about how the Internet can be a useful resource. These numbers will change over time as computer-literate segments of the population get older and as growing numbers of older adults who are not currently using the Internet decide to venture onto the electronic frontier.

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Ironically, in the virtual world, it is usually young people who are considered “veterans” and older people
who are the “newbies.” Younger people today have (and have had) many opportunities to learn how to use personal computers and the Internet. Because many of them are growing up with computers in their schools, libraries and at home, the use of this technology for e-mail, recreational Web surfing, online shopping, entertainment and gaming, news and information, academic research, health education, political organization and other activities is becoming second-nature to them. By contrast, older adults, with few exceptions, were not socialized at a young age to use personal computers and global networking in their day-to-day lives. Although they may be intrigued by all the talk surrounding the Internet, many are not proficient with computer technology and need a helping hand to wire up. Indeed anecdotes about grandchildren teaching their grandparents how to use computers are becoming more common. But there are other ways that older adults are learning about the Net: through work, community programs, university extension classes, libraries, senior centers – to name a few.

At the Seattle Public Library, for example, a variety of free classes are offered on topics such as “Computer Basics I,” “Computer Basics II,” “Internet Basics I,” “Internet Basics II,” “Beginning E-mail,” “Wired for Learning 1,” and so forth. There are also classes designed specifically for seniors such as, “Seniors Computer Basics I,” “Seniors Computer Basics II,” “Seniors Internet Basics,” and “Beginning E-mail for Seniors.” Dozens of networked computers are available throughout the library for patrons to do word processing, surf the Web or check their e-mail. Patrons need to reserve time on the computers – they are limited to 45 minutes per day – and computer use is consistently high. There are similar classes offered at local community centers in the region as well as a “Traveling Laptop Training Lab.” This “mobile lab” consists of ten workstations and rotates among eight branch libraries, stopping for three weeks at each branch. Observation at the Seattle Public Library in downtown reveal a tremendous diversity of computer users – people of different ethnicities, age groups, and social status avail themselves of this free service.

More and more older adults will become wired in the years ahead if current trends hold and as Baby Boomers continue to overflow into the older adult category of Internet users. They will be able to use the Internet as a news and information source, communication channel, consumer guide, entertainment medium, political and social organization tool, and lifelong education resource. This increased access to the Internet is particularly important for those who might want to find health information online. As has been mentioned in previous columns, health information online is varied and abundant. People are often confronted by a larger number of health and wellness concerns as they get older, so having electronic health libraries, Web sites and databases at one’s fingertips can be an important aspect of self-care or the care of a loved one. Also, issues and topics such as the future of Medicare, ageism, The Older Americans Act, the cost of prescription drugs, and many others can be extensively researched and, if desired, acted upon in some manner – such as participating in an online discussion, contacting political representatives or influencing policy formulation through civic engagement.

.03 Demographic Changes Ahead

Before talking about computer/Internet training and resources for older adults, some demographic information might be helpful. Americans, on average, are living longer because of advances in biomedical research, medical care, health education and other factors. The 2000 U.S. Census showed that 35 million people in the U.S. were 65 or older, a 12 percent increase from 1990 and 12.4 percent of the total population, and more than 24 million people were between the ages of 55 to 64. As the
Baby Boom generation continues to age, a larger number of people will enter the “older adult” category. By 2020, there will be more than 53 million Americans 65 years and older; and by 2040, that number will be more than 77 million, about one-fifth of the total population. The median age of the U.S. population was 35.3 years in 2000, the highest it has ever been. The same trend is reflected globally, especially in developed countries. Each month 800,000 people in the world enter the 65 and over category. Europe is in store for a burgeoning of its older adult population; Japan is already in the midst of it.

The Internet will mature alongside the human population, and now is a good time for students and researchers who are interested in the combined issues of computer technology and older adulthood to think of ways that the Internet can better serve this growing demographic group. Perhaps the first thing to do is to acknowledge – and then dispel – a common stereotype that many younger people have about growing old: Old age is not in itself a disability. While people may experience more health concerns later in life, many older adults are living independently and making important contributions to family, community, business, government, education, entertainment and other aspects of society. They work, volunteer, travel, cook, play, study and do a host of other things to keep their minds and bodies active and would benefit just as much, if not more, from being connected to the Internet as more youthful users. In fact, it will be important for the economic well-being of aging societies that older adults remain active and productive in some capacity in the future as their numbers swell and the number of younger workers decrease in proportion.

Of course old age can also bring with it disease and disability. Because of this, many older adults are dependent on family, friends and health care professionals for their day-to-day living. Still, even those who need assistance later in life can be productive and vital members of society. In short, a range of abilities exists in the older adult population, and no one picture should come to characterize this diverse and dynamic group. The bottom line is that in the years ahead this group will grow much larger than it is now or has ever been. Intelligent and sensitive planning for this coming phenomenon will benefit everyone in the long run. Aging and longevity are multidisciplinary concerns, and they are certainly not the exclusive concern of older adults. Because resources are always limited in any complex society, young people are not immune from the effects of an increasingly older population. The Social Security system is a good example of reciprocal impact between young adults and older adults, as are the challenges of family caregiving, the availability of appropriate professional support services, elder abuse by relatives and in institutions, lifelong health insurance coverage, and representation of older adults in the media. Attention to the needs of older adults is a societal responsibility.

Training and Resources: Toward Inclusiveness (return to index)

Helping to reduce technology literacy disparities is just one of many ways that various segments of society can collectively contribute to productive and meaningful longevity. Of course people of any age can lead meaningful lives without the Internet: It should not be inferred that older adults are necessarily “missing out” on something if they choose not to be wired. On the other hand, if they would like to be wired, there should be ways to make it happen so they are not excluded from the benefits of cyberspace. It all boils down to choice and inclusiveness. There are many reasons that older adults may want to be wired. For example, they may have more time on their hands after retiring from full-time jobs and want to use the Internet as a medium for lifelong education – a relatively inexpensive way of satisfying their curiosity about a wide range of subjects they never had time to explore earlier in life. They
may want to communicate via e-mail with friends and family members who live far away or are too busy for regular in-person visits. They may want to do online shopping, banking, filing of forms, and other practical business that would otherwise require inconvenient trips outside the home. They may not be well enough to go out as often as they used to and instead find cyberspace an enjoyable source of social interaction, entertainment, education and civic engagement. The list goes on. As mentioned earlier, like the rest of the Internet-using population, they are likely to be active consumers of health information. (Not incidentally, part of the training for any new Internet user should include a lesson on critically assessing the credibility of health information online and, of course, not using that information, no matter how credible, as a substitution for professional medical treatment.)

For an older adult who is not accustomed to using computers, the issues of training and access to technology are fundamental. Here is where policy and advocacy can play roles in bridging the so-called “digital divide.” Government, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, community groups, health care institutions (such as nursing homes and assisted-living facilities), libraries and others can work together or separately to address the training and access needs of older adults. This is already being done, as can be seen from the Seattle Public Library example mentioned earlier. Similar programs exist from coast to coast. An article in the New York Daily News entitled, “Retired and Wired,” talks about courses in the city designed specifically for older adults, and often incorporating the expertise of younger adults in the process. The article describes one older couple, a husband and wife, who hired a tutor to help them get started. “I don’t know how we could have lived without it,” the wife, Jackie, said after learning the Internet. “We love it.” She is using her networked computer for a wide variety of purposes. The article continues:

Now Jackie gets regular e-mail updates about movies playing near her country home and has bolstered her knowledge about health issues. “I had surgery on my back a year and a half ago. I went on the Internet and looked up everything I could. It was so helpful. Because when you’re going through that, you always walk away from the doctor’s office thinking, ‘I should have asked this, I should have asked that.’” [6]

The article also listed a number of courses offered at educational sites in the city. One at the New School was called, “Computers for Cowards.” New York University’s School of Continuing and Professional Studies offered courses called “Conquering Computer Anxiety” and “Demystifying the Computer.” Cooper Union had one called, “The Personal Computer for Absolute Beginners.” And the Harlem YMCA was mentioned for its free computer classes for seniors. Free computer courses at the Seattle Public Library are also offered in Spanish. A community center in San Francisco’s Chinatown publicized classes taught in Chinese. A non-profit organization called SeniorNet.org has learning centers throughout the country where computer classes are held. Churches, social service agencies, libraries and other organizations often have similar classes in the communities where they are located. This is a good idea as it allows older adults to learn new skills in a familiar and non-threatening environment. These are just a handful of examples of how older adults can get started online. Other ways are more personal and informal – friends helping friends, relatives helping relatives, friends of relatives helping relatives of friends. (You get the idea.)

On the national policy front, the International Longevity Center USA, based in New York City, has been active in helping educate the public and journalists about a variety of issues related to healthy aging and longevity through seminars, publications and policy recommendations. In 2002, it helped publicize an
effort led by Lawrence K. Grossman and Newton N. Minow to establish a trust fund, called the Digital Opportunities Investment Trust (DO IT), which would establish a lifelong learning network for all Americans and would be particularly relevant to older adults who wanted to broaden their educational opportunities. [7] Money for DO IT would have come from the revenues generated from auctioning off the publicly owned telecommunications spectrum, which consists of radio frequencies used for cell phones, television and radio. Legislation before Congress during the summer of 2002 would have created such a trust. As of this writing, Congress has not enacted any law authorizing a DO IT trust fund, but the project remains a vital idea and, if ever realized, would be a significant boon for the development of digital lifelong education programs. More information can be found at the Digital Promise Web site, http://www.digitalpromise.org.

.05 The Future (return to index)

Most teachers would agree that knowledge of the relevant pedagogical literature pertaining to one’s students enhances a teaching and learning environment. Certain groups of students have particular needs, and a comprehensive understanding of these needs allows teachers to design classes best suited to student abilities. Fine motor skills, cognitive functioning, experience, familiarity, fear levels, language, culture, learning styles and a host of other factors impact learning, regardless of age. Technology classes designed for older adults should be informed by research and by the experiences of peer educators. This could make the difference between a successful experience (for both the student and teacher) and an unsuccessful one. Web sites that deal with teaching technology to an older adult population can be helpful as a pedagogical resource. A site called GeroTech (http://www.gerotech.com), which is concerned with connecting technology and older adults, contains a good amount of helpful information and citations for further study. A book called Older Adults, Health Information, and the World Wide Web (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002) is an excellent print resource. There are a number of Web sites and publications that offer Web design guidelines for an older adult audience. One is the National Institute on Aging’s Older Adults and Information Technology: A Compendium of Scientific Research and Web Site Accessibility Guidelines (Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Aging, 2002). The AARP has a special computer and technology section on its Web site (http://www.aarp.org/computers) with many useful links. Editor’s Note (2009): Though this link does not appear to be current, similar information can be found at http://www.meetingtomorrow.com/cms-category/computers-for-adults-over-50

One should not assume that older adults only want to search for information on the Internet that relates to aging. Their interests could be as broad and diverse as an Internet user from any other age group, and a technology course curriculum or lesson plan for older adults should reflect a wide range of topics. This column, however, focuses on health informatics, and thus some emphasis was placed on that topic.

The GeroTech Web site makes a strong case for helping older adults increase their health literacy.

“Inadequate functional health literacy poses a major barrier to educating patients with chronic diseases, and older adults are more likely than any other age group to have illnesses that are chronic in nature (Williams, et al., 1998). Findings have shown that health literacy declines dramatically with age, even after researchers make adjustments for level of education and cognitive impairment (Gazmararian, et al., 1999). Furthermore, the negative association between health literacy skills and age appears to
continue to increase beyond age 65 (Kirsch, et al., 1993). Moreover, patients with low health literacy skills have been found twice as likely to be hospitalized relative to patients with adequate health literacy skills and the financial costs associated with low health literacy may be staggering (Williams, et al., 1998).

Davis and colleagues (1998) identified a number of factors that should be considered when assessing the level of health literacy in a patient. These include a person’s age, visual acuity and level of cognitive functioning. Elder-Friendly health web sites are designed to mediate normal age-related changes in vision and cognitive functioning in order to increase comprehension of and accessibility to the health information presented (Morrell, 2002a). Therefore, it is part of the GeroTech Approach to suggest that the promotion of elder-friendly health web sites may be considered potential powerful online interventions to promote health literacy in older adults.” [8]

Health literacy is arguably a noble goal for people of all ages. For older adults, however, it could greatly improve quality of life and long-term wellness during a time when they are more vulnerable to disease and disability. Helping older adults get wired, if they want to be, is just good social responsibility.

The rise of programs and organizations specifically devoted to the wellness and longevity of older adults is a positive development in society. The AARP, Gerontological Society of America, and Elderhostel have been around for a long time and have made important contributions to the well-being of older adults over the decades. They are joined by newer organizations such as the International Longevity Center and SeniorNet. The John A. Hartford Foundation has funded innovative programs across the country such as the GeroRich Program at the University of Washington, which helps prepare social work students to work with older adults. These and other programs and organizations reflect a social system that is working in different ways toward the common goal of taking care of its aging members. This collective movement needs to proceed at full force well into the future.

For further study about the issues and concerns confronting older adults, the following Web sites may be useful. They are meant both for older adults themselves as well as for their friends, family members, caregivers, and those interested in working with older adults in some other capacity.

.06 Suggested Web Sites: (return to index)

**AARP**
http://www.aarp.org
Description from Web site: AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization for people age 50 and over. We provide information and resources; advocate on legislative, consumer, and legal issues; assist members to serve their communities; and offer a wide range of unique benefits, special products, and services for our members.

**Administration on Aging**
http://www.aoa.gov
Description from Web site: In About AoA you can access information about the agency, its mission, budget, and organizational structure. In addition, you can learn more about the Older Americans Act, the federal legislation establishing the AoA and authorizing a range of programs that offer services and opportunities for older Americans and their caregivers.
AgeLight

http://www.agelight.org

Description from Web site: As a public service, AgeLight.com provides information and resources to active adults, seniors, community organizations and private enterprise to help “Bridge the Digital and Generational Divides.” By communicating the needs, desires and lifestyles of active adults, we are enhancing their community, creativity and employability.

Alzheimer’s Association

http://www.alz.org

Description from Web site: The Alzheimer’s Association, a national network of chapters, is the largest national voluntary health organization dedicated to advancing Alzheimer’s research and helping those affected by the disease. Having awarded $136 million in research grants, the Association ranks as the top private funder of research into the causes, treatments, and prevention of Alzheimer’s disease. The Association also provides education and support for people diagnosed with the condition, their families, and caregivers.

American Society on Aging

http://www.asaging.org

Description from Web site: Founded in 1954, the American Society on Aging is an association of diverse individuals bound by a common goal: to support the commitment and enhance the knowledge and skills of those who seek to improve the quality of life of older adults and their families. The membership of ASA is a multidisciplinary array of professionals who are concerned with the physical, emotional, social, economic and spiritual aspects of aging. They range from practitioners, educators, administrators, policymakers, business people, researchers, students, and more.

Elderhostel

http://www.elderhostel.org

Description from Web site: Elderhostel is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing extraordinary learning adventures for people 55 and over. From New Hampshire to New Zealand, South Africa to South Dakota, Elderhostel offers you a world of educational opportunities – at exceptional values.

ElderWeb

http://www.elderweb.org

Description from Web site: ElderWeb is an on-line community of older adult computer users. Founded in 1994 by the Arts and Science Division of Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton, AB, ElderWeb is designed to provide its services to all adults over 45 years of age in North America.

FirstGov for Seniors

http://www.seniors.gov

Description from Web site: FirstGov for Seniors will empower citizens to obtain valuable health and security information and services at one location via the Internet. FirstGov for Seniors is one of several projects created at the direction of the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPRG). The Social Security Administration (SSA) agreed to create, host and maintain FirstGov for Seniors as a service especially geared toward senior citizens.
Generations On Line
http://www.generationonline.org
Description from Web site: Aimed at the large population of older Americans who cannot afford or choose not to enroll in computer training or Internet training, Generations On Line is both a service for access and product for learning. We provide specially programmed self-training software to senior centers, libraries, retirement homes and other locations where older people congregate. These are free to elders. The cost to the centers is $350 with a small annual maintenance fee. Generations On Line is a national nonprofit 501 (c) (3) corporation, headquartered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.

Gerontological Society of America
http://www.geron.org
Description from Web site: The Gerontological Society of America is a non-profit professional organization with more than 5000 members in the field of aging. GSA provides researchers, educators, practitioners, and policy makers with opportunities to understand, advance, integrate, and use basic and applied research on aging to improve the quality of life as one ages.

GeroRich (Gerontology Enrichment) Program at the University of Washington
http://depts.washington.edu/sswweb/gerorich
Description from Web site: Through funding from the John A. Hartford Foundation and the Council on Social Work Education, the GeroRich Program at the University of Washington School of Social Work aims to prepare all social work students to work with the older adults they may come in contact with across all areas of practice.

International Longevity Center
http://ilcusa.org
Description from Web site: The International Longevity Center – USA. (ILC-USA) is a not-for-profit, non-partisan research and education organization whose mission is to help societies address longevity and population aging in positive and productive ways and highlight older people’s productivity and contributions to their families and society as a whole. The organization is part of a multinational research and education consortium, which includes centers in the U.S., Japan, Great Britain, France, and the Dominican Republic. These centers work both autonomously and collaboratively to study how greater life expectancy and increased proportions of older people impact nations around the world.

SeniorNet
http://www.seniornet.org
Description from Web site: SeniorNet is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization of computer-using adults, age 50 and older. SeniorNet’s mission is to provide older adults education for and access to computer technologies to enhance their lives and enable them to share their knowledge and wisdom.

Total Living Choices (TLC)
http://www.tlchoices.com
Description from flyer: Total Living Choices is a socially-conscious company providing families and caregivers with free, helpful information online to extend the quality of life of seniors. TLC is the exclusive online referral service for the Assisted Living Federation of America and the Adult Family Home Association of Washington State, and partners with the Northwest Parkinson’s Foundation to help the 1.5 million Parkinson’s patients and their families/caregivers through education.
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4. This means that half the population was older than 35.3 years and half the population was younger. The median age in 1990 was 32.9.


7. The International Longevity Center prepared an issue brief on DO IT called, “The Digital Opportunity Investment Trust: Using Information Technology to Prepare for an Older America,” which can be found at http://ilcusa.org/_lib/pdf/lb_200208.pdf.


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2 THOUGHTS ON “OLDER ADULTS AND THE INTERNET”

Jame Bucko
on February 2, 2014 at 3:39 PM said:

Dieser Blog verdient weit mehr Aufmerksamkeit als es jetzt immer

Philomena Onell
on February 4, 2014 at 5:54 AM said:

Questa è una grande lista – non li ho visti come commenti, ma penso che tutti noi dovremmo iniziare a utilizzarle subito!