



Wealth of the Web: Broadening Horizons Online

Report summary

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Background

The government's drive to going 'digital by default' follows the technological trend towards online-based forms of interactions with service-users. However, there is still a large population of people who are not online and the majority of these are people over the age of 55. Whilst the government agenda focuses on getting the required information into systems rather than up-skilling individuals, there is plenty of research evidence that up-skilling older people in computer-competency has clear benefits for them in terms of making cost-savings, having greater choice, overcoming isolation, promoting interests and possibly even combating onset of dementia.

As part of Age UK London's on-going commitment to raising the voice and addressing the needs of older Londoners, this paper provides a summary of a research project targeted at understanding the issue of digital inclusion with respect to older Londoners. From this, recommendations for future action have been proposed across all sectors and across various stakeholder groups in order to promote digital inclusion for interested older Londoners.

Obstacles to getting online

At present, there remain a number of obstacles that make it difficult for older people to become digitally included:

Lack of interest – This includes individuals who, for example, resent being forced online, have had negative early experiences of computers and simply feel that the internet 'isn't for them'.

Marketing of computers, design of products and jargon – This is a deterrent to older people embracing digital access as being relevant to them.

Fears of making a mistake and perception of being unable to learn – These impact an individuals judgement of perceived 'risks' of getting online.

Financial cost – The issue of cost is relevant in terms of the cost of an initial outlay on equipment, the cost of getting necessary training, the cost of support in case of difficulty and the on-going costs of maintaining a broadband connection at home.

Fears of safety and privacy – For many, going online opens up all manner of concerns over who has access to information they put online.

Lack of training and support – There are many examples of good practice out there but it seems that many older people are not aware of them, don't actively seek them or don't feel that they are able to access these resources.

Physical or cognitive impairment – For many, this will link in with the product-design but, for others, the specific concern of failing memory is an issue.

Personal attitudes and beliefs – ILC-UKs research into behavioural economics and digital exclusion (2012) implicated relevance of computer-anxiety, computer self-efficacy, ageing-anxiety, locus of control and loneliness.

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‘An initial motivational ‘hook’ linked with an existing interest encouraged them to go online.’

‘The importance of family in getting online is widespread in literature.’

Drivers for Getting Online

Whilst the list of obstacles may seem daunting, the literature also provides a number of drivers that appear to assist with facilitating digital inclusion of older people. Whilst it is recognised that these drivers will have a greater or lesser impact and relevance to different people, they offer understanding for what changes can be employed to support older Londoners to get online:

Curiosity and an appetite to learn – This initial motivation has been implied as being of key importance when collecting data from people who had attended training courses (QA Research, 2013).

Specific interests and hobbies – For many, an initial motivational ‘hook’ linked with an existing interest encouraged them to go online.

Family support – The importance of family in getting online is widespread in the literature. This also links in with the importance of being informed about benefits by people close to them (QA Research, 2013).

Independence and inclusion – This typifies a desire not to be ‘left behind’ or to be reliant on others.

Work Experience and Studying – Those who use computers for their work or study or who had positive experiences of using computers when working (if retired) also reported this as being a driver for their computer-use.

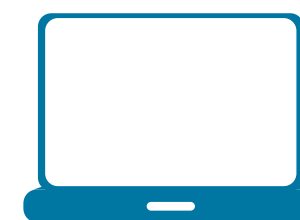
Group and Club Membership – This is important because it represents a potential communicational channel for advertising available courses and for raising awareness of what others have found beneficial.

Personal attitudes and beliefs – As much a potential driver as an obstacle, the opposite end of the spectrum of computer-anxiety, computer self-efficacy, ageing-anxiety, locus of control and loneliness can all be potential drivers for change.

Training and Support – There are a number of good initiatives that have been able to provide evidence for good results in encouraging digital inclusion amongst older Londoners (e.g. Age UK London MiCommunities (2012) and Go ON UK (CBR, 2013)).

A model of digital inclusion

Whilst these drivers and obstacles have been implicated in many studies, older people represent a very diverse population with varied levels of experience and engagement with computers. Nevertheless, research has found certain shared commonalities in participant-response that has enabled the development of categories, or typologies, to distinguish between different, but commonly encountered, views on digital inclusion. Drawing together common themes from other research enables the development of a ‘model of digital inclusion’ representing typologies defined by confidence with and regularity of computer use.



Offline and uninterested

Characterised by:

- Negative associations
- Feeling that it is unnecessary
- Low awareness of online capabilities
- Cynical about technology



Offline but interested

Characterised by:

- Fears of low knowledge/making a mistake
- Perceived financial constraints
- Fear of safety and privacy
- Uncertainty of relevance to lives



Restricted use but online

Characterised by:

- Single-use functionality
- Desire for training
- Desire for on-going support
- Curiosity
- Sometimes feeling ‘pushed’ online



Expansive use and online

Characterised by:

- Positive associations
- Attended good quality training
- High exposure to computers
- Particular online goals

Diagram: A Model of Digital Inclusion through Four Typologies

Fundamentally, and although this is a simplified model, this raises the question of how older people can be supported, if they wish to do so, to ‘move’ through three stages of digital inclusion – from being ‘offline

‘Curiosity is a key aspect of this fundamentally motivational transition.’

and uninterested’ to being ‘offline but interested’, from being ‘offline but interested’ to having ‘restricted use but online’ and from having ‘restricted use but online’ to having ‘expansive use and online’. It also raises the idea that the relevant obstacles and drivers mentioned will have different pertinence for older people depending on where they currently are in this model and that any interventions that wish to be successful need to be targeted to the right people.

Transition 1
From ‘Offline and Uninterested’ to ‘Offline but Interested’

‘Curiosity’ is a key aspect of this fundamentally motivational transition. Older people do not necessarily subscribe to the widespread belief that the internet can provide benefits to them and they do not necessarily have its presence and use as a ‘social norm’ in the same way that other generations do. Whilst some people have felt resentment at being ‘forced’ online to avoid ‘missing out’, the incentive of a motivational ‘hook’ that has encouraged participation of so many would seem a far more positive form of promoting interest. Whilst these ‘hooks’ are as diverse as the interest and hobbies of individuals, there is much that can be done by all sectors in order to avoid alienating older people from seeing themselves as being a part of it.

Transition 2
From ‘Offline but Interested’ to ‘Restricted Use but Online’

Whilst motivational aspects are key in transition 1, the means and practicalities are also of importance through this transition as financial implications of computer ownership, training, accessibility and maintenance need to be addressed. Of particular note, training needs to be targeted at an introductory level that is reactive to the learner’s pace and interests as positive initial experience is key in encouraging online use to those who have made the step. Funders have a clear role here and issues related to accessibility for all have obvious relevance.

Transition 3
From ‘Restricted Use but Online’ to ‘Expansive Use and Online’

Higher level training is relevant here to up-skill those who have engaged with computers but want to know more and there is a mass of literature on training design that, aligned with the preferences highlighted through interviews with older people, should equip providers for delivery. Opportunities for older people to act as trainers should also be encouraged as having someone with perceived similarities who has achieved something has the potential to inspire. Benefits of using computers to do things typically done offline such as making savings on insurance, product-purchase and linking in with social networks can also be communicated here to enable those who already have a level of computer-competency to make the decision of how far they wish to take their level of engagement.



‘Older computer users have the capacity to act as digital champions.’

‘Age UK London have all the materials readily available to support the application of this model across the capital.’

Recommendations for older people

Older people themselves have an obvious role to play in making the transition to using modern technologies and, in particular, those who have made this change in later-life have a great deal to contribute to those who are deterred by fears of operation-complexity, safety and privacy.

- Older computer-users can help by providing their ‘story’ of how they crossed the digital divide as well as describing what particular functions of computer-use are valuable to them.
- Older computer-users have the capacity to act as ‘digital champions’ who can provide voluntary support, guidance and training to other older Londoners at a local level
- Older people need to be pro-active in contributing to those who are trying to support them by, for example, providing feedback on training initiatives and working with private sector organisations to co-design suitable systems.
- In ‘normalising’ internet-use amongst older people, there is clearly more scope for suitably-skilled older Londoners in creative development of attractive online sites and communities.
- There is a role for older people in speaking up and communicating what it is that they want out of digital-inclusivity such that training programmes, support systems and product-development can be based upon the needs and desires of older people themselves.

Recommendations for the Age UK London network

As a pan-London charity representing older Londoners, Age UK London is clearly in a strong position to assist with co-ordinating implementation of recommendations across the capital. Local Age UKs, with their capacity to link in with individuals at a local level also have a vital role in operationalizing recommendations within communities to assist those who wish to, to manage the transition to digital inclusion.

- Having had the success in facilitating MiCommunities programmes as an intergenerational solution to digital inclusivity, Age UK London have all the materials readily available to support the wider application of this model across the capital. Age UK London and local Age UKs should ensure that they use evaluation methods that really capture what aspects of the programme work best and which work less well so that this learning can feed back into the relevant knowledge streams and assist with refining course-design.
- Greater effort should be made to recruit older technology ‘champions’ who can provide case-study success stories to be disseminated through existing network channels.

‘Communicating benefits of getting online should look to relevant motivational hooks to attract interest.’

- Investigating internet support solutions such as MiCommunities but where older Londoners are both the support and the users should also be encouraged.
- Age UK London and local Age UKs should seek to ensure that they look beyond the ‘usual networks’ to reach out to less-connected older Londoners so that they can get the same benefits and such that issues of ‘isolation’ can be addressed as an additional outcome. Jargon should not be used and awareness-raising should be targeted to families and carers as well as older people themselves.
- As the Age UK London Business Directory expands, efforts should be made to ensure that trusted ‘computer-support’ individuals and organisations are recruited and that this resource is communicated to stakeholders through relevant programmes.
- Communicating benefits of getting online should look to relevant ‘motivational hooks’ to attract interest that are tailored more to older people’s interests rather than to pressure into fears of ‘missing out’.
- Disseminating ‘how to’ guides for simple online operations would be a useful resource for older Londoners whilst also potentially attracting internet traffic. As a trusted organisation, Age UK London should also ensure that their website is a user-friendly ‘starting point’ for new computer users.
- Linking in with private sector organisations should be encouraged such that any initiatives being developed for older Londoners can be advertised and made known to those who can benefit from them through existing communication channels.
- Local Age UKs should investigate capacity to provide supported online access opportunities for their local communities from their own premises
- Local Age UKs should seek to work with local amenities such as libraries to assist them to ensure that their digital support initiatives are suitable, attractive and effective for older Londoners.

Recommendations for other voluntary sector organisations

The voluntary sector as a whole has a great deal to contribute in providing support mechanisms for older Londoners who wish to get online through contributing to the pool of digital-inclusion research knowledge, linking with local government, linking with private sector organisations, providing information, advice and sign-posting, and supporting programmes and initiatives to provide hands-on support.

- Through provision of support to older Londoners, voluntary sector organisations should ensure that robust and consistent evaluation methods are utilised to draw comparisons between initiatives and to build a picture of what works and for whom it works best.

‘Support initiative should have a clear idea of who they are targeting.’



- Across the board, more older ‘technology champions’ should be sought both to provide case-studies to inspire others as well as to provide information on what has supported transitions to computer use.
- Organisations with a focus on specific disabilities should ensure that they have a voice in ensuring products and services are suitable for older people, irrespective of their level of disability and ability.
- Support initiatives should have a clear idea of ‘who’ they are targeting. The model on 4.2 gives a summary indication of level of inclusion but an understanding of concurrent support programmes to monitor coverage is critical in ensuring no-one slips ‘through the gaps’ through feeling unsuited to available initiatives.
- As with 5.1, dissemination of success stories, ‘how to’ guidance and awareness-raising pieces in specific areas of interest would help inform communities of older Londoners.
- Linking in with private sector organisations should be encouraged such that any initiatives being developed for older Londoners can be advertised and made known to those who can benefit from them.
- Local organisations should seek to work with local amenities to ensure that their digital support initiatives are suitable, attractive and effective for older Londoners.

Recommendations for regional and local government

As the ‘Digital by Default’ agenda continues to be rolled out, regional and local government have a clear role to play in ensuring that the transition runs smoothly and that those who do not have computer access and/or competency are not disadvantaged by this.

- Information regarding the ‘Digital by Default’ agenda should be communicated through non-computerised channels to give older Londoners plenty of opportunity to make decisions and plan ahead.
- Government needs to link in with voluntary sector initiatives such that these can be signposted in correspondence.
- At a local level, provision of courses specifically for older people, as the largest proportion of the offline population, should be encouraged.
- Whilst it is clear that the transition to online-communications will be promoted, people should be given the option to return to paper-based methods if they find online methods unsatisfactory for any reason.
- Support for completion of online forms needs to be facilitated at a face-to-face local level through amenities such as the local library or post-office. Simplified ‘how to’ guidance for government services should also be provided for those who wish to ‘go digital’.

‘Investment in adult learning is critical.’

- Additional support and advice should be provided for older Londoners with specific needs related to impairments they might have.
- The possibility for enabling family members and or carers to complete online correspondence on behalf of non-computer-using older Londoners should be thoroughly risk-assessed and investigated for feasibility.
- Investment in adult-learning is critical in supporting those initiatives that enable digital inclusion so should be given suitable prioritisation.
- Those support systems that are being facilitated through the voluntary sector should be made known to older Londoners through, for example, sign-posting and social care pathways.
- Funding should be provided to ensure that local support systems are suitably equipped to support local communities. For example, providing enough library staff sufficiently skilled to provide the necessary support or promoting usage of online facilities in other community settings.

Recommendations for funders

Whilst there is evidence that programmes have had success in assisting older people to get online, these programmes tend to target those users who both have an existing interest in computers and who are known to networks. Funders are in a position both to finance support over a large geographical areas as well as encourage innovative approaches at all levels of the model shown in section 4.2.

- Support research designed to contribute to the literature and gain a greater understanding of the motivational transition from being ‘offline and uninterested’ to being ‘offline but interested’.
- Provide the financial backing for ‘trusted local companies’ to deliver evidence-based initiatives to provide support within their own communities.
- Fund innovations that seek to draw links between sectors for mutual benefit to enhance to environment of support for older Londoners wishing to get online.
- Ensure that funded programmes are targeted to all older Londoners, irrespective of location, disability, involvement in known networks etc.
- Ensure that funded programmes are targeted to older Londoners across the transitions of the model of inclusion shown in 4.2; namely those who are offline and uninterested to those who are offline but interested, those who are offline but interested to being online with restricted use and those who then take the next step to being online with expansive use.
- Fund training specifically targeted at older people and encourage a co-design approach to this training with older Londoners who have experience of what has worked for them.

‘Target marketing to older as well as younger consumers’

Recommendations for the private sector

As the largest proportion of the population that is not currently online and who will continue to have computer-access and use incentivised, older people represent a potentially under-targeted market that the private sector can target both for their own benefit as well as prospective consumers of all ages.

- Incorporate older people representatives as co-designers and testers of products to ensure user-friendly operation.
- Develop affordable, low-specification but modern computers to attract entry-level computer acquisition to those on limited incomes.
- In sales outlets, provide basic operations guidance to ensure that older purchasers are clear on what they are buying and are able to test usability prior to purchase.
- Provide reasonably-priced installation and set-up deals alongside purchasing plans.
- Sales outlets could consider having an ‘older person’s afternoon’ during typically quieter midweek working hours where older Londoners can be shown the pros and cons of different computer systems.
- Target marketing to older as well as younger consumers to encourage ‘normalising’ of online use amongst older Londoners.
- When upgrading systems, consider donating out-dated computers to the voluntary sector initiatives that are seeking to up-skill older Londoners’ computer-capabilities.
- Work with the voluntary sector on joint-initiatives to bring informed volunteering staff together with older people to provide hands-on support for specific issues.
- Working with voluntary sector expertise, training for computer sales and advice staff should ensure that they understand additional support needs of older people with physical and sensory impairments.

