Older people and online social interactions

Conference Item

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Older people and online social interactions

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The context

• 1985: over 65s were 15% of UK’s population
• 2010: 17%
• 2035: 23%
• shrinking workforce will need to support a growing population of older people
• technological solutions for their care are being sought so as to improve the services and save costs
• monitoring devices, assistive technologies
Warning by Prof Noel Sharkey, an expert in the field of robotics at the University of Sheffield:

...a future where cutting corners and costs leads to the elderly becoming little more than prisoners in their own homes, socially isolated and tended to largely by machines.


Effects of more independent living

• focus on older people (aged 65+)
• however, we are not investigating telecare and telehealth solutions but...
• their online social interactions
• email, discussions forums, Skype, Twitter, blogs, Facebook
• Tablets (e.g. iPads), smart phones, desktops, laptops

About the project
Context of our project

• digital by default
• social inclusion via digital inclusion?
• being online and social connectedness
  – keeping in contact
  – overcoming isolation
  – something to talk about
  – bridges generations
  – enhance or even sustain quality of life and well-being

What are we investigating?

• motivations for participating in online social interactions
• advantages they experience
• risks that they perceive
• obstacles that they experience
• disadvantages that they experience
What are we hoping to achieve?

• recommendations for
  – supporting older people who are already online
  – how to get older people online
• raising the awareness amongst support networks
  – formal (IT trainers)
  – informal (family, friends, neighbours)

What are we hoping to achieve?

• sensitising designers of websites and online services
• highlighting the need for specialised customer service for older people
• how we should involve older people in the design of products and services?
• how we should be exploiting the skills and experiences of older people?
Who are our participants?

- older people (aged 65+) who are online
- informal support network: family, friends, neighbours
- formal network: IT trainers
- academics: research in ageing
- representatives of Age UK, Carers MK, U3A MK
- marketing consultant: ‘an ageing consumer’

How have we recruited our participants?

- email lists within the university and outside
- through Age UK, U3A MK, Carers MK
- colleagues who have been keen to help
- communities where we live
- recruitment through intermediaries
How are we collecting the data?

- stories via email
- face-to-face/Skype/phone one to one interviews
- group interviews
- workshops Age UK, U3A MK, Carers MK
- events that bring bring people of different skills and backgrounds together but who are interested in this area

Reflections: one-to-one interviews and events

- rich experience and skills set amongst the older users
- like to meet up face-to-face and learn from one another
- are willing to help and participate in research
- like interactivity in data collection
- become ‘co-researchers’
- empathy, patience, concern, follow-up
Reflections: getting people online

- ‘holistic view’
  - their backgrounds
  - what they do now?
  - technology
  - training
  - people around them (support networks)
  - local community
  - costs involved: can they afford?

Report of our preliminary findings

- trigger: finding information, peer pressure, family moving afar
- motivations: social connectedness, keep in touch
- advantages: have a voice, overcome social isolation
- obstacles: finding on-going technical support, other skills that are also required: concept of files, folders,…
Some more of our findings

- **risks**: privacy, fear of being spammed, not sure of the quality of online information, not being able to trust somebody whom you haven’t met in the real world
- **disadvantages**: fear that it would take over their lives, go out less, socialise less in the real world, effects on mobility and isolation

Some recommendations

- not training them in the way that we would like to train them but
  - adapting the training to their backgrounds, needs, interests
- one-off training is not sufficient
- training in pairs by family members is helpful
- using repetitive strategies
- asking them to maintain a notebook
Some more recommendations

- ongoing technical support
- home care workers; neighbourhood ‘technical support’ networks; peer support networks; walk-in centres in the town
- explaining the role of a software application in their context and as per their needs
- making visible the features of accessibility
- privacy in software applications should be set to maximum by default

Our concerns

- time constraints (project ends in July 2013)
- effectiveness of our materials
- take-up of our recommendations
- building a local community of practice: e.g. OU Human Resources, U3A, Milton Keynes, Age UK, Milton Keynes, Carers Milton Keynes, Carers Bucks
- online platform(s) for peer support and discussion
Publications, resources and dialogue


- Website of bookmarks: [https://delicious.com/seniors]

- Project email box: olderpeople-beingonline@open.ac.uk

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