Older people and online social interactions

Conference or Workshop 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
Effects of more independent living

- **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.


About the project

- 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
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 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

• Conducting empirical research with older people. In: Designing for- and with - vulnerable people, 27 April 2013, Paris, France (forthcoming) [http://oro.open.ac.uk/36592/]


• Website of bookmarks: https://delicious.com/seniors

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

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