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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


• Website of bookmarks: [https://delicious.com/seniors](https://delicious.com/seniors)

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

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