Chapter XIV

Portals for Older People in Regional Areas: The Greypath Virtual Community

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ABSTRACT

GreyPath is a Web portal designed to provide information, services, facilities and links useful to older people. Although carrying some advertising and offering some services for a charge, use of the portal is free. This chapter examines potential uses of this portal and how it might be able to foster the creation and maintenance of virtual Internet communities of older people that could be of benefit to older Australians regardless of where they live. Virtual Internet communities like this are of particular importance to people living in regional or remote areas, those with a disability of some kind, and those who, for whatever reason, find it difficult to mix with other people with similar interests. Although further work needs to be done to assess the effectiveness of the GreyPath portal in fulfilling the needs of older people, this chapter identifies potential advantages of portal technology in this context.
INTRODUCTION:
OLDER PEOPLE AND INTERNET USAGE

There are several different definitions of what constitutes an ‘older person’ but for the purposes of this chapter we will define older people as those of 55 years of age and over, regardless of whether they are still in the full-time workforce. The proportion of older people in Australia will increase dramatically over the next 25 years. Foskey (2001) notes that since the 19th century there has been a ‘longevity revolution’ in the Western world and that in Australia during the past decade the over 65 age group living in non-metropolitan areas has seen the greatest rate of growth.

The Australian Federal Government has released a number of issues papers that are related to older people’s capacity to remain active and independent (Bishop, 2000). An important feature of these papers is an emphasis on communication, in particular through the Internet that enables older people to communicate via e-mail with family and friends, to access information and to purchase goods. This emphasis is also consistent with literature sourced from overseas (Franklin, 1997; Coulson, 2000). The use of e-mail can also reduce social isolation for those older people with reduced mobility or those living in remote or rural areas (Parekh, 1998; Bishop 2000).

Information and communication are crucial components of human life at all ages. In this chapter we will argue that the Internet, by potentially overcoming some space and time constraints, could enhance the information and communication options available to many older people, thereby improving their lifestyle (Fozard, 2000). Services and facilities available in regional areas, small rural communities and remote areas of Australia may often be limited compared to those available to people in metropolitan areas (Foskey, 1998). This chapter, through its examination of the virtual community represented by users of the GreyPath portal (http://www.greypath.com/), explores the potential of the Internet to provide regional and rural communities with services and facilities which are often readily available only to older Australians living in the large cities.

PREVIOUS AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH ON OLDER PEOPLE, COMPUTERS AND THE INTERNET

There have been a number of recent studies focusing on older persons and their use of computers and the Internet. Barker (2001) examines the barriers facing older people in their attempt to adopt basic computer technology. He notes that there is a steady decline in the fear of technology, and that seniors’ children,
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