Chapter 2
Old Age, the Internet, and Advancing Technology

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ABSTRACT

The benefits to the old and very old of mental stimulation and close connections with family are well documented. Access to email and the Web can make very large contributions to both. This chapter describes a small research project to place Internet-linked computers in a retirement complex in Melbourne, Australia. The aim was to research the existing computer skills of the residents, provide lessons in the use of email, general computer and Internet use, investigate the most appropriate type of lessons, and document problems and residents areas of interest. This chapter describes ways to minimise problems with applications and hardware, and potential advantages of up-to-date technology such as Tablet computers and ‘Smart’ Television are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The proportion of elderly people in Western populations is steadily increasing. While many of these possess computer skills, and others are acquiring them in various ways, often encouraged by younger relatives, there remain a considerable percentage of elderly people who do not. For most of these, whether they remain in their own homes or are in supported accommodation, learning to send an email or using the Web for more general tasks may present an insurmountable problem. In a few years, perhaps five to ten, it can be expected that this problem will largely cease to exist, or at least become much smaller as the body of the population acquire computing skills at school or work, but those in the intervening gap should not be left out simply because many of their generation do not already have them.

The research described in this chapter was inspired by the need to find suitable ways to teach those aged 85+ to use the Web, and influence policy-makers to recognise the need to provide Internet access and appropriate training for them.
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

For many years it has been almost accepted wisdom to regard computing as a young person’s world. Morris and Ballard (2003) state that “although the research on computer anxiety and attitudes with older adults has yielded mixed results, older adults experience more anxiety and more negative attitudes toward computers than younger adults.” In anything, this attitude is now even more pronounced and in some quarters it is almost the fashion to disparage the ability of anyone not born into ‘the computer age’ to take up, or even see the utility of the computer and its inherent communication possibilities. Pesky (2001) refers disparagingly to anyone too old to be in school in 2001 as a “digital immigrant” suggesting not only the need to learn “an entirely new language,” (his emphasis), but of needing to find a place in a new, and very different, culture.

This attitude is very unfortunate because the Internet, in its World Wide Web form, might have been especially designed for the elderly or physically disabled. Potentially liberating in ways even surpassing its importance for the young and mobile, it can provide a dimension otherwise totally lacking in the life of someone limited in their mobility or confined by circumstances to a single building. Morris and Ballard (2003) note that “exposure to computers and training in basic computer skills may result in more positive attitudes, greater motivation to learn, and reduced anxiety levels.” Shapiro, Barak, and Gal (2007) in a study of 48 people aged 70–93 found “elderly people who began using the internet felt less depressed and lonely, more satisfied with life than did people who were engaged on other activities.” Encouragingly, Hart, Chaparro, and Halcomb (2008) report that “older adults in the US are the fastest-growing demographic, and also the largest-growing group of internet users.”

For this age-group, learning to use the Internet fulfills a double purpose: it is educational and mentally stimulating. Leaving aside medications, Watari and Gatz (2002) list both as the protective factors “with the most convincing support” against Alzheimer’s disease. That seniors’ health in general is closely tied to their mental stimulation is long established (Leonard, 1993; Rönnberg, 1998; Hanson, Lennar, Arvidsson, Claesson, Keady, & Nolan, 2007) and an Internet connection to the world, along with other applications routinely provided by a computer can make a very positive contribution to this.

Regular contact with relatives and friends outside the retirement home is another area often mentioned in connection with the promotion of Senior’s health (Downs et al., 2006). Dobbs, Munn, Zimmerman, and Boustani (2005) found that “increased resident activity participation was associated with two measures of family involvement: the amount of time the family reports being socially engaged with the resident and the family’s degree of involvement in assessing resident preferences.” In a (non-random) study of 122 Canadian adults over 60, Erickson and Johnson (2011) found that “Internet use and self-efficacy remained significantly related.” Significantly, 47% of their sample had been using the Internet for less than five years. It must be said that not all research has found positive connections between Internet access and well-being: Dickinson and Gregor (2006) reviewed the literature and found a lack of empirical supporting evidence.

There are additional practical considerations here. More and more information, vital to all age-groups, is being carried on the Internet. Much of the Australian government-generated and sponsored material to which seniors require access is most easily found electronically (Tran & McComb, 2004). At the same time there appears to be an assumption that once safely inside a retirement home, responsibility for monitoring and acting on such material can be safely passed to the home management, or relatives, since access to the Internet in Australian supported retirement complexes is usually unavailable.

As of April 2012, the Government Aged Care Australia Website listed 62 of 755 retirement facilities within 300 kilometres of Melbourne as