

Digital Britain: We must do more to make technology accessible to older people

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As digital technology changes the way we perform daily tasks like shopping and paying bills, how do those not raised with smartphones and computers embrace such changes? [Jacqueline Damant](#) explains the various reasons why engagement with technology varies among the over-65s, and argues that government and the commercial sector should do more to support older people, as their market-led approaches tend to focus exclusively on younger users.



Information and communication technology is embedded in every aspect of our society. Yet in Britain, there are approximately [3.3 million people](#) aged 65 and over who do not use the internet. This is a cause for concern. As the rest of society shifts to using technology to perform daily tasks, lack of engagement can exclude older people from performing activities such as shopping, banking, playing games, and increasingly, accessing care services. What makes things more difficult is that societal norms and expectations of digital engagement shift all the time, making it difficult for some older people to embrace these changes.

But digital engagement amongst the older population is quite diverse and cannot be painted with a broad brush. Many older people are resourceful and self-sufficient with respect to using information communication technology (ICT), while others are isolated and (digitally) disenfranchised. Internet usage amongst the older population [has also steadily increased](#) over time: in 2006, 35 per cent of the older population had used the internet, compared to 68 per cent in 2015. Similarly, older people's usage of "new generation" digital technology such as smartphones, tablets computers and mobile internet networks has also [markedly increased](#) since 2012.

Despite the increase, my research confirmed that there are marked differences in usage rates within the older population. For instance, compared to people over the age of 74, "younger" older adults have substantially higher usage rates including of the internet, computers, mobile phones and tablet computers. The evidence also suggests that older women are significantly more likely than older men to have never used the internet, and that older *users* of ICT have different priorities to those of younger people. For many younger adults, internet connectivity plays a central role in their daily lives. In contrast, [many](#) older people [appreciate](#) ICT for certain functions (e.g. having a mobile phone for emergencies) but [generally](#) do not want ICT to be an [intrusion](#) into their active, busy lives. But what determines the above differences? Some patterns in the personal and environmental factors have been identified.

Personal Factors

The evidence suggests that older people's attitudes and perceptions towards ICT greatly influenced their digital engagement. People who left the workforce as ICT became mainstream (who are now over 75) had less formal experience with ICT as part of their jobs, a factor which **impacted on** their attitudes and abilities to adopt new technologies. In contrast, their younger colleagues (aged 65-74) who had more such exposure, were more compelled to adopt different attitudes towards technologies.

Then there are also differences in how older people perceived the use of ICT. Those with positive attitudes suggested that ICT presented them with new opportunities for work, volunteering, social networking, entertainment and travel. Those with negative attitudes stated a "lack of interest" in ICT, or that ICT was "not for my age", while others were concerned that the internet would pose a threat to their privacy or thought using the internet is "too time consuming". My research also demonstrated gendered differences in attitudes within the older adult population. "Younger" older people, and older men, had more positive attitudes towards ICT compared to those of a more advanced age and older women. The findings also **reveal** an **association** between older people's **perceptions** of affordability and their perceptions of the benefits of ICT, and consequently their use of it.

What seems to be an important barrier to older people adopting ICT is accessibility, and many sources reported that they found ICT too difficult to use. Poor accessibility also causes some *users* to cease using ICT for reasons including arthritis, deteriorating eyesight and memory loss. And despite being branded as "age friendly", there is little **conclusive evidence** to date on the **acceptability** and **accessibility** of touchscreen devices.

Older people's personal networks have also shown to be instrumental to their digital engagement. Younger family members are often the chief motivators of older people's ICT adoption, both through gifting ICT devices and encouraging the use of email and Skype as the primary method for keeping in touch. The **evidence** also **showed** that some older people **rely** on family and friends as proxy-users of ICT. However, the **evidence** also suggests that ICT use could **exacerbate feelings of loneliness**. **The empirical evidence demonstrates** that older people who **live alone** are less likely to have an internet connection compared to older people who lived with others. Older interviewees also testified that they were unaccustomed to the "new" social norms of communicating and face-to-face interaction, rather than using email or a text.

Environmental factors

Government policies also affect older people's digital engagement. For instance, the government's market-led approach to the roll-out of the "New Generation Access" internet infrastructure has resulted in disparities in regional access to high-speed broadband. As a result, there continued to be poorer broadband services **in areas** where the older population is larger than the national average. And while local governments have developed their online services, few are directly involved in providing services to help older people acquire the skills necessary to use them.

The commercial sector's poor level of understanding of the issues faced by older people might also be a factor. An industry-wide focus on youth has led to a systematic disregard for the needs, preferences and capabilities of older adults, which is both alienating and interferes with their access to ICT. Finally, the rhetoric around older people's digital engagement encourages the negative stereotyping about their abilities and attitudes. There is an implicit tendency in the literature to blame older adults, rather than ICT design, for their lack of engagement, reinforcing the view that older adults should adapt to ICT, rather than **considering** how ICT might be adapted to suit their circumstances and needs.

Overall, there is evidence of a 'cohort effect', where younger ICT users are migrating into older age categories over time, implying that the older population will increasingly use ICT to conduct daily activities and to maintain social networks. However, there is also an **undertone** of ambivalence **suggesting** that older people do not feel they can – nor do they want – to meet the prescribed set of "digital standards" established by the new "digital order". Their

attitudes may be reinforced by the generational bias in the targeting of major innovations in the ICT market, which is predicted to persist into the future.

For older people to become more engaged with the digital society, devices and services must be designed to be accessible, affordable, relevant, and not cause anxiety. In all, there is a need for targeted public action to identify those who are increasingly isolated from the digital society and to provide them with continued support to meet their digital needs.

About the Author

Dr Jacqueline Damant is Research Officer at LSE's Personal Social Services Research Unit. She has recently completed her PhD thesis on the e-inclusion of older people and their access to ICT-based care in England. She previously worked on the EC-funded MonAMI (Mainstreaming on Ambient Intelligence) project, investigating the delivery of ICT-based care on open platform systems. Her main research interests include older people, quality of life, e-inclusion, telecare and telehealth.

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