

Overcoming the Digital Divide

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THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

We all know that technology has become a dominant force in today's society for people of all ages. However, certain elements of society have less access to technology than others. In the literature, discussions and research on these discrepancies tend to focus on factors such as gender, sex, socioeconomic status, race, education, and employment. Occasionally, age is taken into consideration. In reviewing online articles related to the digital divide, it appears that there are many more articles, reports, and projects that focus on factors other than age. Few looked at the impact of the digital divide on senior citizens. One article, "The Internet and Older Adults" (U.S. Administration on Aging, 2004), reports that:

Senior citizens comprise 13% of the U.S. population, but just 4% of the U.S. Internet population. Since their numbers are so small, there has not been much research about what these 'wired seniors' are doing online and how they feel about the Internet. It turns out that seniors who have Internet access benefit greatly from the resources available online—communicating with family, researching health information, tracking their investments—all from the comfort of their home or senior center. (paragraph 2)

The term "digital divide" is often heard and freely used, but what is it? It has been defined by Carvin (2000) as: "...the gap between those people and communities with access to information technology and those without it. Yet, the fact is there are many divides, characterized by community, ethnic, economic, and age groups." He goes on to add that "households earning incomes over \$75,000 are over 20 times more likely to have home Internet access than those at the lowest income levels" (Carvin, 2000, paragraph 1).

This gives us a double, negative impact on financially disadvantaged seniors; they are in the low income group so they are in the bottom of the digital divide, and they are also elder citizens who did not grow up with or use computers. This is a group that needs special attention if the gap is not to widen beyond repair.

Senior Citizens and the Digital Divide

In "Minimizing the Digital Divide and the Inter-Generation Gap," Aphek (2004) states: "New technologies have created a situation rather unknown in human history wherein young children master a skill much needed by adults in general, and seniors in particular" (paragraph 2). The impact of this is that we have many older Americans who do not own and do not know how to use a personal computer for even the basic skills of sending and receiving e-mail, and searching the Internet.

In the article, "The Internet and Older Adults" (U.S. Administration on Aging, 2004), we find that there is data to support the observation that most seniors do not use computers:

Lots of seniors engage with life by reading news or pursuing a hobby, but very few have followed the lead of younger Americans and shifted those activities online. Most seniors do not use computers and do not think they are missing out on anything by not going online.

- *While 56% of all Americans go online, only 15% of Americans over the age of 65 have access to the Internet.*
- *Fully 81% of people who say they definitely will not go online are over 50.*
- *Fifty-six percent of those over age 65 say they definitely will not go online, compared to just 6% who say they definitely plan to go online." (paragraph 3)*

Overcoming the Digital Divide

A few states have not only recognized this gap, but have tried to do something about it. Governor Underwood and Microsoft worked together in 1999 in West Virginia in “Bridging the ‘Digital Divide’ in Rural America: Microsoft and West Virginia Create First State Technology Training Initiative for Older Adults” (Microsoft, 1999). It was reported online on July 22, 1999, that Microsoft donated \$125,000 worth of hardware, software, curriculum, and support to the newly established Seniors Technology Training Program.

One of the program’s graduates, 65-year-old Marilyn D. Tipler of Charleston, West Virginia, said: “This program is great for seniors. Using a computer has helped my career and has been invaluable for keeping in touch with my friends and relatives in Ontario” (paragraph 4).

Craig Spoese, director of the Microsoft Senior Initiative, said that “seniors are in danger of being left behind on the information superhighway, but today the roads are open to them in West Virginia, enhancing their independent living, creativity, and community” (paragraph 3).

In another state, Pennsylvania’s State Representative, Daylin Leach, helped seniors there “...cross the ‘digital divide’ and (he) works to help the less fortunate learn computer skills,” as the article’s title states (Caton, 2003). Working with TeamChildren, he helped get six refurbished computers “donated to the Upper Merion Senior Center through a joint effort between Leach, TeamChildren, and Conrad Cruse, a retired professor who runs the computer program at the senior center” (paragraph 2).

Although the case that seniors need to be able to use computers may have been made, the story relayed by Stover in “Technologies that Help Senior Citizens Utilize the Internet and Computers” is so appropriate that it has to be shared (Stover, n.d.):

At about 70 years old, my father began to express a strong desire to learn about computers. Now granted, he didn’t have a computer, nor had he ever set finger on a computer, but that seemed irrelevant. He had actually never even used a typewriter before (he had always had a secretary or my mom to help him). Retired and alone he had no secretary or wife to help him with his business correspondence. He felt he needed to learn the computer because it was becoming too important. That year at Christmas I splurged and bought my dad a computer. We sat down and went through all

the hardware, software, and help available. He was thrilled to be learning the computer, and copiously wrote down every bit of wisdom that I shared with him about it. I even included (2) classes at the local computer superstore.

As the weeks sped by, I began to question my dad’s commitment to becoming computer literate. When I would ask him how it was coming, he hadn’t even turned the computer on. When I asked him if he had scheduled the computer class, his response was that he was too busy. Not wanting to be a nagging daughter I would always agree. When weeks stretched into months, and months stretched into a year and the computer began to have a thick coating of dust, I decided to have a heart to heart with my dad. Cautiously over lunch I broached the subject. My dad finally admitted the real reason for his lack of use. The truth was that he didn’t know how to type, and would be embarrassed in a class. ‘That’s an easy fix dad, we’ll just stop by the computer store and buy you a typing tutorial,’ I replied, confidently thinking I had just solved the problem.

Over the next couple of months, my dad began to progress slowly. Then he dropped another bombshell on me. My dad admitted that the typing tutorial was helping, but he was now 72 year (sic) old, and was having trouble seeing the screen. We invested in a larger screen for him, which helped. Not to be outdone, my dad’s friends also bought computers. They were having some of the same problems that he was. (paragraphs 1-3)

Having the right equipment, training, and success are essential elements for seniors to be successful in becoming computer literate. In fact, once fluent in the use of the Internet, seniors can find other satisfactions. For example, Marjorie and Dick Piaget of Wilbraham, Massachusetts, both age 70, found love on the Internet as reported in the *Microsoft PressPass* on February 15, 1999, and featured on the “Today Show.” After each acquired basic computing skills, they met in a SeniorNet online chat room. When they eloped, they e-mailed the news to their children!

Similarly, a testimony by Marta Shaw shared that “My mom’s live (sic) completely changed after the computer lab was set up at the nursing home. Her last year of life was significantly enhanced by being able to stay in contact with family and friends through e-mail” (Shaw, n.d.).

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