

# Never too old...

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Although there is a popular misconception of older people being technophobic, Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show them to be among the fastest-growing population subgroup to embrace the internet. While there is some Australian research on older people's use of computers and the internet, almost all has highlighted the barriers to their adopting this technology and ways to overcome obstacles.

My research focused on what *motivates* older people to take up computers and the internet in the first place, and what they get from use of them. The project, undertaken as part of a Graduate Diploma in Commerce (Information and Library Management) at the University of New South Wales, came about through both a professional interest in older people and the fact that my own ageing parents were at that time attempting to become computer- and internet-savvy. I therefore became aware of various internet classes for seniors in that particular Sydney municipality, and hence a potential convenience sample for a small pilot study.

I approached the central public library where internet courses for older people were run. The library wrote to all the older people in their records, explaining about the pilot study and asking them to telephone me should they be interested in participating. Eleven interested people telephoned, and I mailed them a non-identifying questionnaire with a stamped, return-addressed envelope. I also approached a local seniors' computer club and found fifteen willing participants. The final group of seven was recruited using the snowball technique, whereby friends, and friends of friends, of my parents agreed to participate.

The four-page questionnaire was derived from an examination of the relevant literature. There were three sections: the first asked for information concerning computer use and self-perceptions of skill level; the second inquired into internet use; and the third asked for demographic data. Questions were both closed and open-ended, allowing for analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. No funding was sought; the greatest costs entailed postage and paper.

The research revealed that some thirty of the thirty-three respondents accessed a computer at home, four in their local library, and three in the computer club, at voluntary/paid work, or at college/university. 'Hand-me-up' gifts from family members was the most-cited reason for initially acquiring a computer. Just over one-third initially learned to use a computer through informal mechanisms, one-quarter trained at work, while two in five undertook formal courses. With any subsequent formal training, the instructor was mostly aged 25-45 years; her/his age was

overwhelmingly considered unimportant. Three respondents felt very confident, eleven were quite confident and nineteen felt they needed more practice with computers. Importantly, no respondents reported feeling uncomfortable with computers, despite one person's comment:

*At first I was worried I'd damage it, or it would blow up, but my daughter assured me I couldn't hurt it unless I threw it over the balcony.*

While there was some trepidation with using computers and learning how to access what was required and to understand computer jargon, four respondents enjoyed the sense of 'fitting in' and being able to converse with other computer owners. Computer malfunctions or breakdowns and participants' own shortcomings were among the difficulties encountered.

Those who did not access the internet cited its (perceived) difficulty, lack of sufficient time to learn, the expense involved, or lack of interest as the reason. Some 73 per cent of respondents *did* use the internet: just over one-third of these daily, and just under one-third once or twice a week. Most computer time was spent in finding information on the world wide web; sending e-mails; and on banking/finance. They were wanting *informational* (specific information; information not available in print; education; knowledge; up-to-date financial data; anti-virus updates), *affective* (satisfaction, enlightenment, entertainment, enjoyment); and *social* (friendship) benefits from their use of the internet. Perceived bonuses were access to information and therefore greater knowledge, enhanced communication, and the speed and ease with which both these processes occur. The most frequently visited sites were seniors' sites, news sites and travel sites. For one in five respondents, finding desired sites was the most challenging aspect of the internet, while for others it was setting the computer up for internet use, finding appropriate search engines, or avoiding 'clutter'. Difficulties encountered concerned unreliable internet service providers, dropouts, accessing the required site, the cost and personal shortcomings. Only two had engaged in e-commerce; the other respondents reported a reluctance to provide credit card details over the internet, not yet having need to use it, and lack of interest, as reasons for non-use.

In all, the research highlights not only older people's trepidation with computer and internet use, but also their thirst for social interaction, their quest for pertinent information and their desire to keep up with the times.

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