

## Finding local solutions to the digital divide

By **Marie Jobling** and **Kate Kuckro**

For older adults who are not yet online, understanding and accessing technology can seem impossible. To close this digital divide, professionals can start working together at the local level. We at the Community Living Campaign did this in San Francisco through the multi-sector SF Tech Council ([www.sftechcouncil.org](http://www.sftechcouncil.org)), concentrating on technology and healthcare, attitudes and learning, and access and equity.

Patti, one of Community Living Campaign's Community Connectors, set up a handful of laptops and tablets in a church hall to teach her neighbors, who are mostly in their 80s and 90s. She introduced a collection of analog items the neighbors already knew: radio, TV, telephone, camera, records and tapes, maps, phone book, encyclopedia, newspaper, calendar and recipe cards. After some reminiscing, participants began finding the same items online, and they have been enthusiastic learners, with a particular fondness for watching YouTube to access old TV shows and music, using Skype to connect with relatives and finding friends on Facebook.

### Attitudes and Learning

According to a 2014 Pew Research Center report on older adults and technology use ([goo.gl/Y2et5t](http://goo.gl/Y2et5t)), there are two camps among older adults who don't use the Internet: half of non-users (49 percent) agree, "people lacking Internet access are at a real disadvantage because of all the information they might be missing." But others don't feel they're at a disadvantage. This is despite the pace at which information, communications and government services are going online.

The Pew report also found that older people, more than any other age group, value having a place to get help in person: 77 percent of older adults ages 65 or older want someone to help them with a new digital device, and 56 percent want help learning how to use social networking sites. Once older adults learn how to use devices and go online, they become regular Internet users, with 71 percent going online almost every day and 11 percent going online three to five times a week.

At the SF Tech Council, we've found that the challenge is to find access points that can reach beginners skeptical about the need to be online as well as more experienced users looking for help with job-related skills or to learn something new.

Some strategies we've found to be effective include starting with topics important to older adults, and letting the computer skills follow—taking and sharing photos, genealogy and storytelling all are popular. Offer neighborhood-based training, because learning close to home in a friendly setting is less intimidating and offers a community of helpful friends. Enlist older adults from the community as technology coaches; as peers, they're able to relate to the fears that beginners may have, and they can also offer tutoring in their native language.

Reassuring older adults that they can navigate safely online is an essential piece of digital literacy training—we teach that Internet safety is really a continuation of the common sense precautions we take in the non-digital world, and provide suggestions about protecting passwords and other precautions.

### **Technology and Healthcare**

There is a growing array of technologies to help older adults age well, including assistive devices, wearable devices, personalized healthcare, pill monitoring and more. Older adults can find apps designed to turn a phone or tablet into an adaptive device for hearing loss, vision loss and communication. And new innovations from companies like Lyft ([goo.gl/MHvVvP](http://goo.gl/MHvVvP)) tailor existing services to older adults' needs. As companies design for older adults, there are several key points to keep in mind.

Create devices and apps that work for older adults, ideally by including their input in the design process. As Darlene Yee-Melichar, gerontology professor at San Francisco State, points out, this includes accommodating vision and dexterity changes with larger-size devices; including simple troubleshooting mechanisms; and offering devices with fewer extra features.

Privacy and security, particularly for healthcare applications and devices, is a significant concern for most older adults. Companies need to provide appropriate data safeguards and policies as they develop technologies for this age group.

A number of healthcare innovations require a higher level of health literacy, as well as cultural competency and proficiency in additional languages. These issues have come up repeatedly in SF Tech Council workgroups.

### **Access and Equity**

Nationally, two in five people ages 65 and older are not online, and rates of adoption are even lower among those who are older (37 percent for those 80 or older), and those with the lowest levels of income or education (39 percent and 40 percent, respectively), according to the same Pew report. Elders with physical challenges to using technology are even less likely to go online.

Adoption rates also vary significantly by ethnicity. In San Francisco, in 2015, 90 percent of all Caucasians and 89 percent of Asian Pacific Islanders had home Internet access, compared to 70 percent for African Americans and 84 percent for Latinos, according to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors ([goo.gl/ZiNttw](http://goo.gl/ZiNttw)). To foster access and equity, we recommend the following:

**Low-cost Internet access.** Many libraries, community and senior centers offer computer and Internet access, plus training topics and classes. The ideal, however, is access at home to reinforce learning and to stay connected to family, health professionals and community life. Price is often cited as one of the main barriers, according to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors ([goo.gl/PXTq9q](http://goo.gl/PXTq9q)).

(See the sidebar below for our recommended, affordable access programs.)

**Affordable devices.** While devices are getting cheaper, they still can be expensive for those on limited incomes. But programs exist that refurbish older devices and provide them at lower cost (or for free). If purchasing a device, we recommend tablets and laptops so that participants can bring the devices with them to a computer lab, library or friend's house for getting help when technical issues arise.

**Adaptive technologies and strategies.** About 40 percent of older adults have physical conditions or health issues that make it difficult to use new technologies. Luckily, there are many adaptive technologies and strategies to make devices more accessible: larger font sizes, high-contrast keyboards, input devices that are easier to manipulate, talk-to-type technologies and screen readers, etc. It is important to address accessibility issues from the outset. And if possible, partner with organizations that provide resources, training and peer mentors with disabilities who can demonstrate how much adaptive devices and strategies can do.

In San Francisco, the SF Tech Council has begun uniting businesses, nonprofits, academics and city departments to identify needs, suggest solutions and spark innovation at the intersection of health, social services and technology.

Bridging the digital divide for older adults is a large, multi-faceted challenge, yet we can boost access to technology and improve quality of life for older adults in our communities by focusing locally. Both big cities and small towns can start by bringing together people who are interested, determining what resources are available—libraries, senior centers, faith communities—and then developing and implementing a creative plan that fits local assets and needs. ■

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## Resources for Boosting Elders' Internet Access

### **Internet Access:**

- Comcast Internet Essentials, Senior Pilot & HUD Assisted Housing programs (<https://internetessentials.com>)
- Access by AT&T ([www.att.com/shop/internet/access/#/](http://www.att.com/shop/internet/access/#/))
- PCs for People (uses Sprint) ([www.pcsforpeople.com](http://www.pcsforpeople.com))
- EveryoneOn ([everyoneon.org](http://everyoneon.org))

### **Low-Cost Devices:**

- PCs for People
- Local computer recyclers like *Reliatech.org* (SF Bay Area) and *Human-I-T.org* (Los Angeles)

### **Digital Literacy for Older Adults:**

- Local libraries
- Community Living Campaign ([sfcommunityliving.org](http://sfcommunityliving.org))
- Community Technology Network ([ctnbayarea.org](http://ctnbayarea.org))
- Self Help for the Elderly ([www.selfhelpelderly.org/our-services/additional-projects](http://www.selfhelpelderly.org/our-services/additional-projects))
- Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) ([oats.org](http://oats.org))
- AARP ([goo.gl/DgRrvl](http://goo.gl/DgRrvl))

### **Online Safety:**

- Connect Safely Senior's Guide ([goo.gl/ZZhXM0](http://goo.gl/ZZhXM0))

### **Technologies for Older Adults:**

- Aging 2.0 ([www.aging2.com](http://www.aging2.com))
- "Mobile Device Apps for People with Hearing Loss" by Larry Medwetsky (*Hearing Loss Magazine*; Sept.–Oct. 2015 ([goo.gl/Q68HBf](http://goo.gl/Q68HBf)) and Nov.–Dec. 2015 ([goo.gl/95VQ0W](http://goo.gl/95VQ0W)).
- Access World ([www.afb.org/aw/main.asp](http://www.afb.org/aw/main.asp)) from American Foundation for the Blind ([goo.gl/23gCCz](http://goo.gl/23gCCz))
- Ability Tools—CA Assistive Device Lending Libraries ([goo.gl/TppfsO](http://goo.gl/TppfsO))

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