

Globe Talk: The push for seniors online

July 7 2006

Going online is no longer a choice, but a necessity for those living in highly wired societies. What's more, old age should not be an excuse to be cut off from cyberspace, or so argues the British government.

In a report released earlier this week, the consumer panel of Britain's Office of Communications warned that by not accessing the World Wide Web and all it has to offer, elderly people risk being socially isolated if they do not get connected.

"The panel takes older people's ability really to use this technology very seriously. This is my generation; and many of us are not as engaged in today's rapidly evolving communications world as other people. With more and more local and central government services online, as well as the best deals for commercial services, people who are not connected will find themselves increasingly excluded in today's world," said Colette Brown, the panel's chairman, in announcing the latest findings of the study on older people and communications technology.

The study found that there are largely four groups when it comes to Internet access: "absorbers," who honed their computer skills at work and are now part of the digital age; "self-starters," who took it upon themselves to go online even though they were not encouraged to do so for professional reasons; the "disengaged" non-users, who do not see themselves being able to use a computer, but once they are able to, actually embrace the technology; and "rejecters," who might have ready access to the Internet but deliberately choose not to go online.

Among those four main groups, the study expressed concern about the possibility of the "disengaged" becoming an ever-growing part of the population, as the country's population continues to age. As such, many people could be cut off from various services including those provided by the government simply because they are not using the Internet, even though they would if they were simply given the opportunity to do so.

Over the past few years, the British government has been one of the most active in embarking on a national campaign to ensure that those are often the least likely to embrace information technology such as older people and those from poorer income households are made to become familiar with and make use of available communication technology tools, most notably the Internet. Programs such as using community centers and public libraries as well as schools and hospitals to teach people basic computer skills have been widely available nationwide. In addition, Britain has been active in promoting e-government and getting more public services available online in addition to encouraging people to be more vocal on local as well as national issues.

Still, the report said that the government could do more to reduce the digital divide within Britain, especially since the country has signed up to the European Union's agreement to halve the gap in Internet usage by 2010 for groups at risk of exclusion. Currently, only 28 percent of those over the age of 65 in Britain have home Internet access, compared to 57 percent for the national average.

"We want the government's digital strategy to use the lessons learnt by organizations that are already helping older people to go online. The UK government has just committed to halve the gap in Internet usage by 2010 for groups at risk of exclusion such as older people. The panel will work closely with the relevant government departments to achieve this aim in the UK," Brown said.

The study found that even those who initially reject the idea of using the Internet provided they get enough encouragement and an appropriate learning environment, such as having access to courses designed for and run by older people, coupled with mentoring schemes.

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