

How do older people use e-mail?

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Making it easier and remembering the steps to perform tasks is more important than increasing the size of the elements on the interface. Credit: SINC

Researchers at the Universidad Pompeu Fabra (UPF, Spain) have studied how older people interact and use email in their daily life. The study was carried out in social centres in Barcelona and will be used to design new email systems that are more intuitive and accessible.

Electronic mail or [email](#) is the [internet application](#) used the most, even by older people, who haven't grown up with Information and [Computer Technology](#) (ICT), and have had to put in greater effort to learn to use it than younger people. However, social and technological scientists still know very little about how older people or the elderly interact with email systems in their daily life.

"We wanted to understand how older people use email on a daily basis in

terms of accessibility, frequency, type of content, relation with other technology and activities, communication models, motivations and interactive experiences", Sergio Sayago, main author of the study and researcher at UPF, explains to SINC.

The ethnographic investigation, published recently in the *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, spent three years analysing email use habits of close to 400 people between 64 and 80 years-old in social centres in Barcelona.

"In this context, [ethnography](#) consists of spending a lot of time with the users in real-life interaction situations, observing how they use the technology, speaking with them (informal conversations, interviews in groups or individually), and taking notes on almost everything", Sayago explains.

Up until now the email design was carried out in laboratories and was limited to making prototypes. "We asked ourselves what happens in real life", explains the researcher.

Social use of technology

"Older people feel motivated to use ICT as they see it as an important element for feeling part of contemporary society and fighting against the [isolation](#) that can increase with age", the study explains.

Researchers have demonstrated that older people use email within a restricted circle of two different social groups: relatives (a few emails a month, but which are detailed and emotional) and close friends (more frequent and exchanging information based on their social life).

"They use email to communicate with their social circles; they don't use it as a means of establishing relationships with people they don't know.

For this, they have other more down to earth strategies in their lives such as going to a social centre to a dance, and meeting people there", confirms the researcher.

Independence with the computer

There are three prototypes of email managers designed for older people: SeniorMail, which proposes a redesign of the email manager Outlook Express; Simple Mail, a simulated email system with a user interface simplified to five functions, and Cybrarian, based on fewer functions and an increase in the size of the features.

"We have observed that making it easier and remembering the steps to perform tasks is more important than increasing the size of the elements on the interface. This is clear from the importance that older people place on their independence. They don't want to depend on someone else to be able to send an email and they want to use the same mechanisms as other people", explains the researcher.

The researchers are facilitators at a social centre in Barcelona where they teach new technology to [older people](#) and immigrants, so in addition to information on email, they have gathered information on interaction with other technology such as web 2.0, online forms, office applications, to contextualize the results.

"We plan to combine our results with some controlled experiments to better determine the impact of the accessibility barriers that we have identified", the experts conclude.

More information: Sergio Sayago, Josep Blat, Telling the story of older people e-mailing: An ethnographical study, International Journal of Human-Computer Studies 68 (1-2): 105-120, Feb 2010.

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