Startup offers elderly an Internet key to family links

July 27 2014, by Isabelle Wesselingh

Two grandmothers mystified by computer tablets have inspired a French-Romanian startup to develop an application and service to help the elderly stay in touch with their relatives through the Internet.

The system—the work of a startup called Hubert—began operating in the United States and in Europe on crowd-funding website Indiegogo this month.

"Everything started after one of my grandmothers died in a home for dependent seniors in France," Stephane Lucon, a Frenchman who co-founded Hubert, told AFP.

"I was living with my wife and children 2,000 kilometres (1,250 miles) away from her, in Romania. I went to visit her whenever I could but I would have liked her to be able to see her grandchildren every day via Skype or any video conference application."

But like many octogenarians or older, his grandmother did not know how to use a tablet or a PC.

A Pew Research Center report published in April showed that US senior citizens are lagging behind the overall population in online usage.

Only 37 percent of those over 80 go online, compared with 86 percent of the overall US population who use the Internet. The picture is similar in Europe.

Around the world, populations are ageing quickly. The number of over 80s will have almost quadrupled between 2000 and 2050 to 395 million, according to the UN World Health Organization.

Many seniors understandably have difficulty with digital communications, having spent most of their lives in the pre-Internet era.

Granny becomes app tester

After the death of one of his grandmothers, Lucon was determined to help the other one benefit from video link-ups.

"I realised that many elderly people are intimidated by the big number of applications on the tablet screen," he says.

From his house in the Romanian countryside, he worked for months on a new screen launcher with the help of a UK-based Romanian IT designer, Petre Nicolescu.

His 87-year-old grandmother was consulted on every step and asked for her opinion.

"I wanted to build a new interface so that she could see only one or two buttons on her screen with the application she uses: Skype, games," he said.

The result is a simplified screen on which all unused applications are hidden.

But as tablets can still puzzle new users, Lucon and his team created a support service that can take remote control of the device to fix problems or install new apps.

"Retailers usually consider that the family is here to help the seniors with the device but relatives often do not have the knowledge or the time to do it," Lucon said.

By pressing a help button on their screen, users will be connected vocally to a real person for help.

The support line will be accessible for a basic monthly subscription of $20 (15 euros).

Maintain social contact

Last year, US retail giant Amazon added a "Mayday" alarm button to its Kindle tablets for live technical support.

"A major difference with Amazon Mayday is that our interface can be used on any Android tablet," Lucon said.

Initiatives like Mayday or Hubert "help as they give a human face which is more important for the older generation than the younger one who is comfortable Googling questions," Carolina Milanesi, chief of Research of KANTAR Worldpanel Comtech Cell, told AFP.

Hubert has chosen to base its research and development in France.

The call centre will be based in Romania, which has become a European hub for IT support.

"Helping seniors to connect is not only an economic issue, it's first and foremost a social issue as technologies can help less mobile people to maintain social connections," Thomas Husson, an analyst at international IT survey group Forrester Research, told AFP.

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