

# Narrowing the digital divide

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Information and Communications Technology (ICT) learning and support in the UK relies primarily on the goodwill of friends and family and on the availability of staff and volunteers in community venues, such as public libraries. This ad hoc approach is highly variable in quality and reliability and will not reduce the digital divide between older people who could benefit from ICT but do not yet do so and the younger generation, according to research published in the *International Journal of Technology*.

Leela Damodaran of Loughborough University and Jatinder Sandhu of Nottingham Trent University explain how they have examined the key role of formal and informal social support in reducing digital inequalities by enabling the digital participation of older people. Their work focused on the Sustaining IT use by older people to promote autonomy and independence (Sus-IT) project in the UK over a four-year period working with over 1000 older people using mixed research methods within a participative framework.

The team suggests that the [digital divide](#) might be narrowed through the implementation of more informal and socially-embedded community-led ICT support for older people. Such support is likely to be helpful to other digitally excluded groups, but the present research was based upon working with older people in the UK.

Digital technologies are becoming increasingly pervasive and integrated within society, the team explains more aspects of modern life rely on access to online services. As such, those without the necessary skills or

training to keep up with an ever-changing online landscape might be left behind. Obviously, many sectors of societies face barriers to the internet, but perhaps none more so than the older generation who in many, but not all, cases may not even have access to a personal computer let alone one with the requisite high-speed, or broadband, internet connection. Further, the process of learning about new things is promoted by social contact and when people retire their social networks often diminish significantly adding an additional barrier to digital participation by older people.

Online shopping, registration for services, communication with friends and family and many other activities that many of us, and particularly the so-called "digital natives" take for granted are essentially inaccessible. They need not be, of course, given the connectivity and social nature of local libraries, community centres and other public places. As such, a primary barrier that needs to be surmounted is the void in ICT learning support beyond the work place.

Build confidence and capacity in the use of ICT in older people and opportunities arise that will enhance their well-being and quality of life, reduce social isolation and loneliness, and moreover give those people access to the services that everyone else now takes for granted.

"The underpinning premise of our proposition is that community-based ICT support provision enables [older people](#) to solve their problems, manage their lives (including their health conditions), enhance their well-being, engage with friends and pursue their passions empowered and enabled through their use of technology," the team reports.

**More information:** The role of a social context for ICT learning and support in reducing digital inequalities for older ICT users.  
[irep.ntu.ac.uk/27281/](http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/27281/)

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