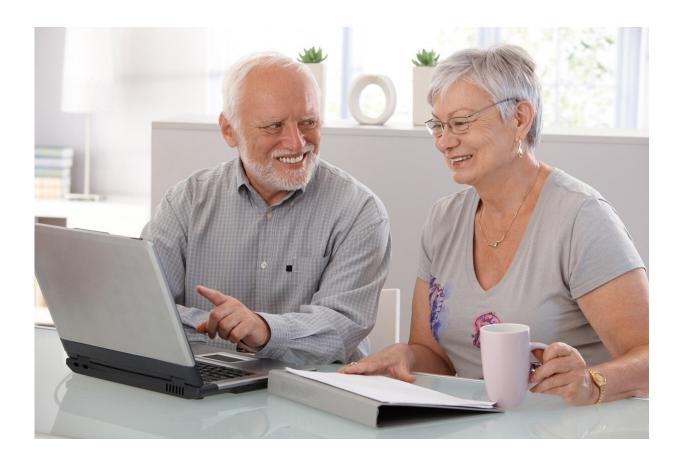# Guided digital skills training enhances older people's digital skills and social relations

June 7 2021

Credit: University of Eastern Finland

Older people need digital skills training to learn to use digital technology more independently, but they also seek digital training opportunities because of the social benefits they offer, according to a recent study

from the University of Eastern Finland. Published in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, the study examined perceived benefits of digital skills training among older adult learners, their teachers and peer tutors. Data for the study were collected in liberal adult education organizations, such as community colleges, as well as in peer tutoring sessions organized by third sector actors.

New skills and friendships

The coronavirus pandemic has, for its part, highlighted inequalities in the availability and use of digital technology. People in different life situations have different opportunities to practice and develop their digital skills, which are rather essential in today's world.

Older people participating in the survey study wanted to attend digital skills training primarily in order to learn digital skills. Digital skills enabled them to solve technical problems and to use digital technology more independently.

"The perceived benefits of digital skills were often related to the ease of everyday life, such as being able to use electronic services, leisure time, or staying in touch with friends and family," Postdoctoral Researcher Kaisa Pihlainen from the University of Eastern Finland says.

However, digital skills training sessions are also beneficial in terms of social relations. According to the study, the training sessions were a good opportunity to meet other people and to establish friendships. That, in turn, was a source of more inner motivation and activity in older people's lives, which supported their personal development.

"For older people, participation in digital skills training is often a combination of individual and social reasons."

Meaningful experiences and promotion of well-being

According to the survey study, social benefits were highlighted especially by peer tutors.

"They valued a sense of community and togetherness with other older people. Peer tutoring was compared to the workplace: it provided peer tutors with a network of experts which respected and offered help to others."

Interdependence and reciprocity proved to be meaningful experiences in digital skills training sessions organized for older people. In addition, participation in new learning communities can boost older people's learning and enhance their well-being.

Digital skills training sessions were a source of joy, satisfaction and success for learners, teachers and peer tutors alike. Peer tutors reported that they had a stronger sense of belonging to society when teaching digital skills to other older people. Providing digital skills training was seen as a new alternative to civic participation and active citizenship, and it also enabled them to find their place in digital society.

"For some peer tutors, it was also a meaningful route to transition from working life to retirement," Pihlainen says.

According to the study, participation in digital skills training sessions supported the well-being of older adult learners as well as the well-being of their teachers and peer tutors. The majority of peer tutors reported an increase in their well-being when providing digital skills training. Digital skills learners who responded to the survey also described that their attitude towards digital devices had become more positive.

Research can support recruitment

Research-based knowledge can be used to strengthen peer tutors' and digital skills teachers' internal motivation in digital skills [training](link) situations. The recruitment of new digital skills tutors and teachers can also be supported by drawing attention to the perceived benefits. Emphasizing these benefits can also encourage older people to learn how to use digital technology.

"Supporting older people's digital skills is also important at the level of society because other civic skills are usually learned at earlier stages of life. Digital skills are learned through experience, and this is why we need action to ensure that also older people have opportunities to experiment with [digital technology](link) and to learn digital skills in ways that interest them."

At the same time, more support for learning and personal growth should be targeted at older people.

The data included 226 respondents, 136 of whom were women and 90 men. The mean age the respondents was 71 years.

More information: Kaisa Pihlainen et al, Perceived benefits from non-formal digital training sessions in later life: views of older adult learners, peer tutors, and teachers, *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/02601370.2021.1919768](link)

Provided by University of Eastern Finland