



GOING MOBILE!

NEW APP ENCOURAGES SENIOR SURFING

By Lori Latimer

As adults, sometimes we take our daily life skills for granted. Consider driving, for example. It might have been exciting as a teenager, but as we grow older, most adults don't think twice about grabbing their car keys, turning the ignition, and driving to where they need to go. It could be hard to imagine not driving at all, relying on connecting buses and trains to get from point A to point B.

Conversely, it could be just as difficult to imagine driving as a non-driver: Who would teach you? What if you fail the road test? How long will it take to save for a car? What if you get into an accident? In 2022, using the internet is one of those daily life skills that many adults take for granted. However, just like having a driver's license and owning a vehicle, not every person is guaranteed access and expertise. Research examining the digital divide emerged in the mid-1990s as home internet use became more common. While the term "divide" suggests a simple matter of "haves" and "have nots", this separation proves complex and layered. This complexity is particularly evident for older adults.

The digital divide not only refers to who can access the internet and who cannot, but also the gap in depth and breadth of engagement with the internet. Studies show that older adults are less likely to use internet-based technology than younger people, and for those older adults who do access the internet, they tend to engage with it less than their younger counterparts. Experts in gerontology and aging services emphasize that

older adults are a diverse subset of our communities, representing an expansive variety in cultural expression, education, work experiences, income, physical mobility, and cognition.

So, for older adults who have the opportunity to access internet-based technology, what could be holding them back from exploring? "Anxiety. Straight anxiety," explained SOWN participant Bernadine Glenn when she described her initial memories of using the internet. Fellow participants Joan Snyder and Thelma Weeks remembered fear. Ms. Snyder explained, "It was scary because if I started to type, if I put something in there, I could lose it, or didn't know where it was going to go." Ms. Weeks echoed Ms. Snyder. "I was scared when I got on. I was scared I was going to mess up. I was pushing keys and didn't know what would happen. I was afraid of not doing it right."

According to studies in gerontology, ageism sits at the root of this fear and apprehension, implicating such prejudice as a significant contributor to the digital divide. Accepted societal views that older adults are slow, easily confused, and incapable of learning or changing can lead them to experience insecurity when sitting in front of a computer or picking up a smart phone. As older adults see negative perceptions of themselves depicted in television, movies, and advertisements, as well as in interactions with family, customer service staff, and health care professionals, they internalize the belief that they are too slow and incapable of adapting to changes in technology.

If you're slated to fail, why even try? Better to spare oneself the frustration and humiliation. Priscilla Longs summarized the experience of her peers: "I think what makes us afraid as we get older, kids go so fast...they don't have patience with us. They don't want to slow down so we can catch up." Some studies have explored self-efficacy as it relates to engaging with the internet, finding that older individuals tend to believe that they cannot be successful at new tasks, which causes anxiety when encountering internet-based technology.

Ms. Glenn, however, will not accept society's belief. She pushed back at the

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stereotypes perpetuated by ageism, insisting that older adults can and should learn and adapt: "I don't understand why people think you can't learn anything new when you get older. People need to stop that. I don't like that. You've got to get with the times, you've got to learn."

Among SOWN's participants, Michelle Charlton and Sheila Johnson reflect Ms. Glenn's sentiments. Ms. Charlton shared that she started using the internet in the late 1990s when her family got one of the first Gateway desktops and never stopped exploring. "I went through a lot of different experiences [with technology]. I just

get on there and figure things out." Ms. Johnson noted that she began building her digital literacy skills in 2015 when she went back to college. She recalled, "I had all the youngsters teach me. That's where I learned, and I'm thankful for it because things have changed in even this amount of time. So, it's worth it."

When Ms. Snyder reflected on what motivates her to keep building her digital skills, she laughed, "I want to go online shopping!" She then added that she sees information as the main benefit of facing her internet fears. "If you have a question, you can always find an answer. There's knowledge at your hand," Ms. Snyder said. Ms. Weeks and Ms. Johnson exclaimed almost in unison, "Google and Siri!"

Building the App

In the Fall of 2020, SOWN was presented with the opportunity to develop a mobile app. While our organization frequently incorporates digital literacy lessons into our programs, we were unsure what to think about this possibility. The mobile app could act as a tool to boost participant engagement, streamline communication with staff, and improve data collection. It sounded great, but still, we hesitated. Could SOWN really do this? Should we do this?

If SOWN had an app, would anyone even want to use it? In a way, SOWN went through a parallel process to our clients coping with internalized ageism. Just as some older adults might doubt that they have the ability to download and use a mobile app, as an organization serving older adults we questioned if we were the right fit to integrate a mobile app into our services.

Ultimately, SOWN decided to pursue the opportunity and pilot the mobile app with participants in our grandparent programs. Many of the grandparents work on their digital literacy skills to interact with their grandchildren's schools and health care systems, in addition to joining their grandchildren on the internet for entertainment and information. The mobile app would be another learning tool. While this would be new territory for both the organization and participants, we wanted the older adults connected to SOWN to at least have the choice to learn this new platform and bridge the digital divide. As one SOWN staff member put it, "We don't want them to get left behind."

Thanks to funding from the Caroline Alexander Buck Foundation, SOWN enlisted the digital platform company, MilkCrate, to develop a mobile app that would appeal to smart phone users of all experience levels. Milkcrate specializes

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