



Discussing strategy at the Wollert Seniors Workshop



Workshop members take part in laptop-sharing activities

Support clients to engage with technology

Organisations play a crucial role in assisting older adults as they strive to improve their digital literacy, writes the SHAPING CONNECTIONS team.

The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us much about the importance of fostering and supporting digital inclusivity in older Australians.

Thanks to expanding infrastructure and the ease of access to information and communication technology (ICT), it's never been easier for older adults to connect digitally, yet many still harbour fears that stop them from doing so.

The pandemic made visible how these fears can lead to cases of isolation, as well as the dangers associated with low levels of digital literacy in the community.

Co-created by RMIT University's School of Economics, Finance and Marketing, and the University of the Third Age (U3A), Shaping Connections is a research program designed to address the unique considerations and fears of older adults so they may confidently engage with ICT.

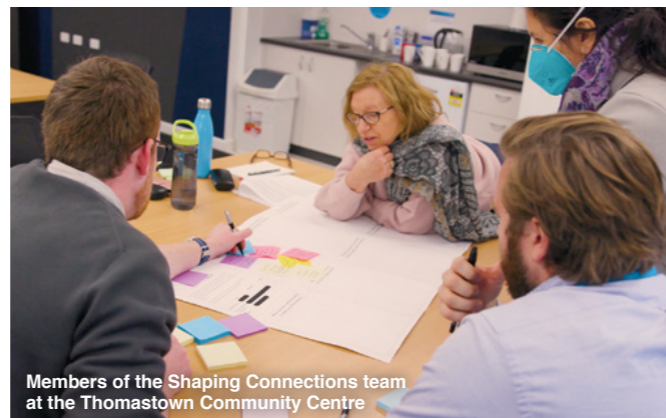
We do this by co-designing solutions with older Australians tailored to their needs.

Organisations that work with older adults play an important role in making this possible.

As advocates for the community, such organisations can provide opportunities through practical and social platforms that will lead to increased social and digital inclusion.

One such opportunity was presented last year, when the Shaping Connections team collaborated online and in-person with U3A members and older adults from the City of Whittlesea to conduct workshops on co-designing strategies for addressing ICT risks and empowering older adults in their use of technology.

Our research revealed six key



Members of the Shaping Connections team at the Thomastown Community Centre

perceived risk groups that can be targeted to address the concerns of older Australians:

- operational and functional
- privacy and transaction
- purchase transaction
- overspending
- personal and social
- physical harm.

Workshop participants took part in two activities.

The first was persona enrichment, during which they discussed fictional individuals and their fears associated with technology, based on the risk groups above.

The second activity – scenario mapping – placed these personas in challenging situations and asked participants to discuss potential solutions to these challenges.

When they applied personal experience, reflected on the persona's aspirations around technology and explored ways in which digital skill levels led to differing perspectives of risks, participants engaged strongly with the activities.

“They highlighted a desire to learn further and be provided with clearer pathways to gaining ICT skills.”

They expressed ways in which they thought others like them would be empowered to better articulate their digital literacy levels, and showed appreciation for how the process enabled a variety of voices to be heard.

Furthermore, they highlighted a desire to learn further and be provided with clearer pathways to gaining ICT skills.

Our pathway to providing older adults with the tools and strategies required to achieve their goals around technology education and use is made up of three steps.

The first is self-assessment. On our website – shapingconnections.org – we provide three self-assessment tools designed to increase the user's digital confidence.

These tools provide strategies framed through the six unique personas presented in our workshops.

Users of the tools select the persona that represents them and receive tailored strategies empowering them to begin understanding and addressing their fears.

While these tools can be used independently, they work best when facilitated by organisations working with seniors.

Organisers can set up activities in which seniors browse through the different personas, discuss their differences and pick the one that best fits them.

The examples and strategies provide great material for group activities, as they stimulate conversations about what solutions will work for the personas and what won't (see box right).

The second step is where organisations supporting the older Australian community play the most critical part.

These organisations are in a unique position to provide the social context and opportunities required to meet the diverse needs of older adults.

Peer learning is the cornerstone of this process. Older adults don't want to be lectured to.

Perceived too often as a homogenous group, they get no value from being treated like they all have the same digital literacy level simply due to their age.

They learn best from those who share common experiences, or community connectors who they recognise as understanding their interests as individuals.

“Peer learning is the cornerstone of this process.”

By selecting community connectors from senior organisations, as well as from the peer group, important knowledge won't simply be transmitted – it will be tailored.

Older adults must be served through education programs developed with an appreciation of the experiential challenges that influence their use of ICT.

We highly recommend senior organisations connect with educational institutions such as universities or TAFEs, as well as social organisations like U3A and local computer clubs, to create a foundation on which their members can begin co-designing ICT strategies.

Such experts understand how to develop educational products that consider the scaffolding of knowledge on a needs basis, and how to segment learning groups to get the best results.

The third and final step is to encourage lifelong learning.

Organisations supporting older adults should be prepared to facilitate ongoing teaching and learning activities such as peer-led workshops and study groups.

Technology evolves rapidly, and so do the benefits it can provide.

These activities not only allow new waves of older adults to develop their ICT skills, they also ensure the knowledge of those already improving their digital literacy remains relevant.

By providing activities around these three steps, organisations working with seniors can efficiently co-design ICT strategies that can make a significant difference in the lives of older Australians.

Many thanks to ACCAN for supporting this research.

Shaping Connections, a RMIT and University of the Third Age partnership, brings together academics and stakeholders from across disciplines. It includes Associate Professor Bernardo Figueiredo, Dr Torgeir Aleti, Professor Mike Reid, Professor Diane M. Martin, Professor Larissa Hjorth, Jacob Sheahan, Dr Mark Buschgens, Glen Wall and Anne Grigg. This article was co-written by Mitch Ziems. ■

How to use the Shaping Connections interactive tools

Shaping Connections has developed and made available three interactive tools to help older adults begin the journey to understanding and utilising technology in ways that best suit their needs.

The tools are designed to be accessible to all users, so we encourage everyone to try them out.

When starting the self-assessment tool, users can select between the interactive assessment option or downloading a PDF that can be printed and completed with a pen. Users should save the results for use in workshops.

The second tool encourages seniors to consider the pros and cons of getting help from people in their support network, from children to service providers.

The third tool contains strategies created by older adults to help others overcome perceived risks about the use of technology.

Visit shapingconnections.org/tools

Users can visit the resources section to download our *Connectedness & ICT* and *Improving ICT Confidence* booklets for further information. As with our interactive tools, these booklets are created for older adults of all digital literacy levels.