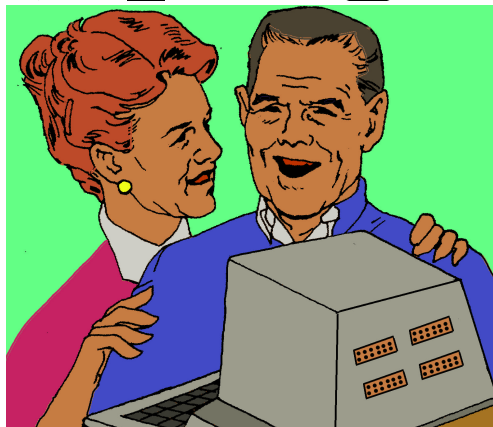# Senior Online

Use of networks for reducing the isolation of elderly people and people with mobility impairments

*An EU-funded research project,
starting January 1998 and ending December 1999*

"Elderly people cannot learn to use computers!", "Elderly people cannot benefit from computer communications!": There are many prejudices in our view of elderly people. The success of SeniorNet in America has shown that we have to find innovative ways to break such prejudices. Internet and other uses of information technology (IT) is rapidly changing the life of people in Europe. It is important that elderly people are not left out of these changes.

The goal of this project is to stimulate people above 55 years of age to use tools for exchange of information between humans on the Internet. To achieve this goal we will set up CMC services with (1) access to special interest topics, (2) a frequently asked question area moderated by geriontology experts, (3) forums to exchange messages on any topic of interest, and (4) multimedia electronic mail. The service will be available in the native languages of the project user group members.

We will support existing and stimulate the formation of new organisations for the elderly, investigate their needs in using CMC and IT, Select, design, develop and demonstrate methods to help and teach elderly people on how to use CMC and IT. Our development will be based on existing Internet standards, World Wide Web, e-mail and the Web4Groups system (which is being developed in an ongoing EU-Telematics project). We will not develop new web browsers, but may modify existing web browsers through plug-ins, helpers or Java/Javascript applets.

Demonstrations will begin immediately, using existing software. We believe that demonstrations of prototypes is an important method of collecting user requirements from users. User representatives will be actual elderly people, which we will find through partners which are organisations for elderly people or which are local governments with interest in supplying IT services to elderly people.

Project characteristics

Users involved

Users involved will be elderly people, taken from partners which are organisations for elderly people and municipal centers offering social services to elderly people, found through partners which are local governments with special interest in IT support for elderly people.

Technologies and/or approach used

Existing standard Internet technology like the WWW and e-mail will be used, combined with new technology such as the EU-Telematics-funded Web4Groups system. Web4Groups will be modified to suit the needs of elderly people.

Expected benefits for the citizens

Caretakers, friends and relatives will benefit from SeniorOnline since it will facilitate their contacts with elderly people. Local governments will be aided in their contacts with elderly citizens.

Expected benefits for the users of the application

Elderly people will have more contacts and be less isolated. They will be able to benefit from the IT revolution instead of being left out from it. We expect that SeniorOnline will also increase face-to-face contacts for elderly people.

Expected benefits for the European Industries

Several of the present partners of the Web4Groups consortium are planning to further develop Web4Groups into a marketable product. SeniorOnline will open up new markets for their product.

Contribution to EU-policies

SeniorOnline will be a distributed service, which provides good local communication but also good communication at large distances across international borders. The lack of dependence on geographical borders will stimulate understanding between people in different countries.

Short project description

Issues to be solved

- Reduce the loneliness and isolation of older people
- Awaken the interest in CMC and IT technology among older people
- Stimulate the age-link philosophy by interactive communication between elderly and younger people
- Let older people communicate with each other aided by information technology
- Improve the autonomy and quality of life of the elderly people and stimulate their integration into our society
- Reduce the reliance on caretakers
- Allow older people to communicate interactively with caretakers and local governments
- Reduce the costs of social support services for the elderly

- Allow older people to get social support through information technology

Project methods

SeniorOnline will stimulate people above 55 years to use information technology and the Internet. To achieve this goal, the project will

1. Support existing organisations for the elderly.

2. Stimulate the formation of organisations for elderly people interested in information technology and the Internet, such as SeniorNet.

3. Investigate the special needs of elderly people in using CMC and IT.

4. Select technology of special value for elderly people.

5. Develop, demonstrate and use methods to teach elderly people on how to use CMC and IT.

6. Develop Internet tools for communication with and between elderly people, based on existing Internet standards, World Wide Web, e-mail and the Web4Groups system (which is being developed in an ongoing EU-Telematics project).

Why SeniorOnline is needed

Nearly a quarter of the population of the EU (73,000,000 people) is 55 years or older. The majority are retired. Adjustment to retirement is often difficult for a number of reasons. Of these the lack of social contacts can be particularly damaging. This may begin with loss of work colleagues, which can often produce feelings of depression and isolation. Reduction of mobility can cause additional difficulties in establishing social contacts. Other losses which older people regularly face are deaths of spouses, relatives and friends. Life-events such as these are particularly hard to cope with, if a social support system is not in place. The Internet is a proven medium for social interchange, especially via e-mail and newsgroups, but the access facilities are too complicated for most older people. The success of SeniorNet in America, which already has branches in Sweden, New Zealand and Mexico, shows that elderly people are willing and interested in using computers for communication. The first European branch of SeniorNet (in Sweden) is a partner in this project.

Many European governments are spending much money to spread usage and knowledge of

IT technology among young people. The old people tend to be forgotten. The aim of this project is rectify this imbalance. The old people also have capabilities, experience and wisdom of value in the new information media.

SeniorOnline will make the Internet available via a *very easy access* method. SeniorOnline has the potential to reduce the biggest problem of the elderly `loneliness', and to improve the quality of life for this large group of our population. It also facilitates the socio-economic integration. Statistics prove that stimulating mental activity improves human well-being, especially for the elderly. Experience also shows that use of electronic communication does not confine users to the home, but increases their circle of friends which they will want to meet also face-to-face. SeniorOnline will prevent the elderly from becoming further disadvantaged in their access to advanced services and equipment. It does *not* ignore the needs of the elderly, like most new technologies do. Identify and assess the user needs and requirements in combination with an extensive validation will be strongly emphasised.

The main characteristics are:

- A solid technological foundation in existing Internet technology and in the EU-Telematics Web4Groups system.

- Use in state of the art requirements elicitation method from user groups representing real elderly people.

- Guided by a strong quality plan derived from the ISO 9001 standard

- Managed by a project manager with many years of multi-national experience

Anticipated results

SeniorOnline will allow elderly people to communicate, get friends, and exchange ideas through computer aided communication (CMC) tools. It is well-known that such electronic contacts often cause increased face-to-face contacts. They are not a replacement for face-to-face contacts, but door-openers.

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