A PERSON ISSUE BEFORE A TECHNOLOGY ISSUE – Part 2

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes recent experiences of using IT with those older people who are usually considered more frail or vulnerable. It comes to the conclusion that IT does make a life enhancing difference to their lives and that simple ready to use hardware and software is adaptable to meet the needs of most users!

Keywords

Invigoration Therapy, accessibility options, Netscape Navigator.

1. INTRODUCTION

For the HCI conference in 2002 my contribution was called "It's a person issue before a technology issue". The fundamental point made was that to get significant numbers of older people using computers a personal approach is an essential element. This paper reports upon work done since 2002 and how these experiences have only reinforced our earlier view. Four points will be made:

- Using computers is not a fair descriptive term for this work which actually enhances people's lives;

- Older people have self images which influence their choices of working and learning;

- Modern software already allows the needs of most older people to be met but many traditional IT users are not aware of what is possible;

- Using appropriate but simple accessibility options enables more frail older people to use IT.

2. BACKGROUND

Since 2001 Age Concern Oxfordshire, in partnership with Age Concern England, developed Age Resource Desks. These are centres with one or two computers and appropriately trained volunteers or staff who can help older people learn to use IT initially on a one-to-one basis. They are called Resource desks because they are not training bases; the computer is looked on as a source of fun, communication and information. There is no set course at an Age Resource Desk and so the volunteer helpers respond to the needs and capabilities of the clients to make learning fun. Eventually some clients have the confidence to go on to more formal training and/or buy their own equipment. However, many remain with the service because it is the only provision that meets their needs. A personal approach is needed because many older people do not see the benefits of IT or they believe that they can not cope. Some have great physical limitations and so we have widened the scope of using IT to include making decisions about its use. In this way more frail clients can choose colours, fonts or illustrations and so create their own cards, menus or programmes even if they can not strike a key. This is very labour intensive but the rewards are quite staggering as the next section will try to show.

3. IT AS INVIGORATION THERAPY

Older people are hard to generalise about because, as Alan Newell said at HCI 2002, their needs and abilities are more diverse than any other group of people. Many are perfectly able to use and learn IT for themselves and the new types of flexible learning "courses" where credits can be cashed in at any time during a certain period really helps this group. As a charity we have to use our resources appropriately and so we try not to compete with mainstream training even though that is the route to much funding. Therefore, we are most interested in helping the older people who have more restricted options due to their abilities or locations within Day Centres or Residential Homes. These older people can feel that their chances to learn new skills are greatly diminished and that their quality of life is worsened by ill health and their circumstances.   However, it can be seen that using IT with this group of older people means much more than using computers. The chance to communicate with the rest of the world or distant relatives is a revelation to older users; it is like learning to communicate as a young child again.   The opportunity to be "taught" by grandchildren is life enhancing and the fact that the older person has learned new up-to-the minute skills, at a time when they thought they may be unable to do this, is truly invigorating. There is no other large group of people for whom IT can enable so much personal growth through Invigoration Therapy. Marlene Hicken coined this term when writing for **www.theclockhouse.info** about her work as a volunteer for us at Shotover Day Centre.

4. OLDER PEOPLE LIKE TO BE LIKE OTHERS

This point is an extension of the first. By using IT older people feel a part of what is going on in society and they have access to e-shopping, e-banking and e-government. Equally all media contacts have references to websites and so older people will feel excluded if they are not able to use IT. New opportunities are created too, for example one of our first clients, who needed IT support at home, now has a "job" as a moderator on **www.idf50.com** – this has completely changed the outlook on life for someone who was largely housebound. The chance to share and record reminiscences is also a powerful invigorator. Recently the BBC has given this opportunity to many older people through its on-line archive of stories "The People's War". Many older people have made their own contributions which can be read at www.bbc.co.uk/ww2 However, our volunteers have worked with those who cannot use IT so that they are not excluded. All of these contributions can be read by searching for Clockhouse within the People's War webpage. The writers have often been quite disabled or frail but they have shown enormous interest in the archive and have taken great pleasure in telling friends and relatives how to access their stories.

Wanting to be like others applies to hardware too and so we find that some older people insist on trying the laptop touch pad mouse even when we think that an external trackerball may be much better. Laptops are now more popular due to their lower prices and the need for many older people to conserve space. We have also introduced particularly frail clients to their use via our laptop based outreach service. However, laptop keyboards are also harder to see and use. We encourage clients to look and try before they buy to determine the suitability of equipment to their needs. The size and colour contrast of the keys is very important as we found when we accompanied one wheelchair user to a well-known computer retailer which displayed all it products at heights too high for him to see! We also remind clients that plug-in keyboards are cheap to add to their package and "big key" keyboards are liked by many once they have overcome some of the limitations of "wanting to be like others".

5. ACCESSIBILITY VIA SOFTWARE

Many people are still unaware of the accessibility options within windows. We use large text, large scroll bars, large pointers and large icons all the time and we also regularly adjust mouse click speeds. So it is a real shock to move to computers in other centres which have not been set up in this way. Large icons on tool bars are especially useful to many users! This re-emphasises another point made at HCI 2002 that good aids for "critical users" such as older people, are likely to be of benefit to most members of society. Making use of the accessibility options is helped by websites such as www.abilitynet.org.uk/myway and www.microsoft.com/enable Using in-built settings is totally acceptable to our clients and does not compete with the principle of "being like everyone else". Likewise using an alternative web-browser to Internet Explorer is also acceptable. We have found that Netscape Navigator is much to be preferred because of its "view menu" which allows text to be enlarged to 300% or more. The enlargement is very high quality and characters are not pixelated. This is a much more user friendly option than the "magnifier" in windows which needs a steady hand to operate it and yet steady hands are not common among our older clients.. Email is one of the top requirements for older people and this is where the enlarge text facility of Navigator really scores. Many other centres are still surprised when we demonstrate dual control of the computer often via a mouse and a trackerball working together. This is an inbuilt facility but one that is not widely used. It makes a statement for left-handed users and allows the helper to point on the desktop without invading the client's personal space or hijacking their mouse.

6. THE FUTURE

Much of our work in the future will be as a second tier service training staff and volunteers in using accessibility options so that many more older people can benefit from Invigoration Therapy. We also seek the funding needed to continue to operate and, in particular, expand the outreach service and take IT to the many individuals, clubs and centres where older people have never had the chance to experiment and be involved with IT. A particular target should be older people from black and ethnic minority communities who may feel isolated. We have one volunteer from this community and it has proved particularly hard to introduce the clients to IT even though we can demonstrate a wide variety of newspapers, pictures and music that is available from around the world. Electronic Diwali cards have been tried but we have no recipe for success in this area of work yet.

7. WEB REFERENCES

www.theclockhouse.info	our work and the concept of Invigoration Therapy
www.idf50.com	a site for older people
www.bbc.co.uk/ww2	reminiscence work
www.abilitynet.org.uk/myway	accessibility options
www.microsoft.com/enable	general advice