

DESIGNING FOR AGED PEOPLE COMMUNICATION NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes interest to developing digital services and application to the active elderly people. People, that have retired or are about to retire and do not have daily obligations to their children. These people have more free time than in earlier stage of life. They are often in good health to be able to choose their lifestyle. The user group is very heterogeneous and for some reason has not received much attention. They live active life, and are likely to have various communication needs, yet they seem to be fairly satisfied with existing communication tools. For starting to use new tools, they need clear motivation.

We are studying on communication and lifestyles of retired people to understand better their needs and shed light more on the motivational issues that may be one so far neglected key point in creating pleasurable products and services to these user groups.

Keywords

Aged people, senior citizen, communication needs, design

1. INTRODUCTION

The western societies are aging. The life expectancies increase and more of the typical old age illnesses can be treated better than before. Consequently, governments are now feverishly thinking of ways support independent living in the late phase of life and ways to answer the nursing needs. The positive effect that this may provide to society is sometimes forgotten: there will be more of those capable and reasonably healthy aged people. They are the people who were born after the 2nd world war (baby boomers) and are in many ways different from their parents. They are more experienced in taking new technology into use, consuming services and having demands. More importantly, they have wide experience and views that that they are likely to be able to share with younger generations and continue to make an impact to the society.

In order to provide services and products that would support their lifestyle and activities, we need more information about this age group. The general aspects of physical aging that affect to the design, such as changes in sensory functions and cognitive issues, are being researched and results are available to the industry, although the application of this information and the practical experience may still be among restricted group of professionals. Furthermore, we feel that motivational issues are even less

researched and less applied. The situation is not alleviated by the fact that a lot of research with older generations may not apply to the aged people in the future.

2. 3RD AGE AND THE MEANING OF AGE

Peter Laslett [1] has defined the concepts of third and fourth ages for the old age. The third age is the part of life, when chronological age allows person to retire from work life and family related obligations have changed, as person is not anymore responsible of his/her children. In third age people can be active, as they are independent from others. They typically have free time and do not feel the weakness of old age. In short, this is the time of life that many people are dreaming of while still at work. The 4th age follows then possibly later in life when the abilities are weakening so that everyday life is dependent on others.

Although the third age is not defined by the chronological age, we can roughly say that in the western societies people around 60–80 years old are typically in 3rd age. The time and length of 3rd age varies greatly among persons, depending on personal differences, socio-economical background, living area and sex. For example in Finland, 75 years seems to be a statistical age when serious illnesses and deterioration starts to become obvious. At the age 75–84 years, at least 50% can do daily routines such as shopping, walking over half kilometer, dressing up, etc.. but the percentages are much higher for ten years younger people [2].

We are defining the age on physical and mental abilities more than on the chronological age, since it is the key issue that enables people to choose their lifestyle also in old age.

3. HETEROGENIOUS LIFE STYLES

Aging people have been often treated as homogenous group, but people in 3rd age are as heterogeneous as any other customer segment. In fact, the age is likely to bring more differentiation in some needs due to increased variation in physical condition and life experiences.

The diversity seems to be further growing when post-war baby-boomers grow older as they have more differences in several aspects: there are big differences in education level, living places (rural or urban), experience of different cultures, work history, family background (single, married, divorced, re-married, living with different or same sex partner).

There will be senior citizens that are physically in better condition than earlier generations - the ones that keep on jogging, going to gym and doing other physical activities they have always been doing. But there are also those who are weaker than earlier generations since they have never been exercising or done physical work.

A study [3] of people over 75 years old divided their lifestyles in 5 groups:

- Family oriented
- Work oriented
- Hobby club oriented
- Quiet life living
- Illness-centered lifestyle

The people in their 3rd age seem to be able to choose their lifestyle. The fifth category seems to imply 4th age where illnesses are making it difficult to live other type of life. The study showed that good health gives possibility to choose own lifestyle and several roles in life. For most of the people in the study, the social contacts and social support network have formed before the retirement and old age. The main social contacts were ones established through marriage and/or divorce, children, friendships and hobbies. The possibility to move around was one of the main factors in ways to keep in touch with others. If person was not able to visit others, the number of contacts seemed to be smaller and the contacts were mostly taken care in phone.

4. OUR ASSUMPTIONS AND STUDY

It seems that senior citizens have been later adopters than younger generations for the current general-purpose communication technology such as mobile phone or PC with Internet [e.g., 4, 5]. We assume this is partly due to the fact that people receive information of new technology, e.g. Internet, from their colleagues, friends and acquaintances [4, 6]. When people retire, some of these interactions and daily routines change. We are studying how retirement, a major milestone in life, causes changes in the lifestyle communication patterns. For example, people may join to different kinds of hobby clubs or informal groups spending time on some common activities during daytime. Or they may choose not to form new acquaintances.

The adoption of new technology and prevention of digital divide will be a major issue also for the future seniors. They

are familiar in the current technology already but no doubt the development will continue and there is going to be always something new.

We hope that by looking more carefully of the lifestyles of aged people we can support the peoples' lifestyles better and increase their quality of life. We would like to find digital services that would be perceived instantly valuable and truly useful for people in their 3rd age. Possibly, these applications would in fact be first adopted by seniors and spread to wider population from there. Also, the applications adopted already in the 3rd age could be easy to use also later in life, in the 4th age. We would like to also note that our aim is to find ways for supporting quality relationships and interaction between people with technology, not to replace it by technology.

The study has just started and we will be able to share some information about the study in the HCI and Older population workshop. The study aims to receive deeper understanding by continuing with person-to-person interviews and diary-keeping .

5. REFERENCES

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