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ICT and the Over 50s

Digital competencies in later life

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Over the past three years, a group of project partners has been exploring and examining the theme of what it means to talk to the Over 50s about ICT.

In practical terms, the experience consisted mainly of selecting the good practices listed on the website, and organising meetings, where we exchanged knowledge and met experts and stakeholders.

Such a long, complex experience naturally led to many reflections. It also influenced our working practices.

What does talking about the Over 50s and ICT involve?

I'd like to begin with some examples from private life and the world of work. They show how computer skills are a daily necessity for anyone over 50. This includes people who are still working and those who are no longer in paid employment or don't need to learn to use a computer for work.

Private life

In the winter of 2012, there was a sudden cold snap in Genoa, Italy (my home town), and many outside boilers were affected. Gianco and Titti, 80 and 78 years old, telephoned the heating engineer to tell them that their boiler was making a strange noise and ask for a technician to be sent out. They were told to record the noise coming from the boiler and send it by email so the technician could work out what the problem was.

A few years ago elderly people were told that computers were a good way to play solitaire, write messages to friends and grandchildren, visit museum websites and read the newspapers.

Today insurance quotes and claims are sent by email. Stolen and lost items can be reported to the Police using the Internet. Buying goods online is much cheaper. It is now possible to receive the results of medical tests by email.

At work

In February 2012, the Monti government raised the pension age in Italy from 60 to 67 as part of its pension reforms. The legislation will be implemented in full in 2018. This means that people who until a few months ago were expecting to work for at least 6 more years will now have to work for 13, more than twice as long. In recent months



many other European countries have significantly raised the pension age. Combined with the greater likelihood of people losing their jobs because of the economic crisis, and the fact that older people are also having to seek new employment, there is now a need for many people to learn computer skills. This was not the case when they were only expecting to work five or six more years.

What the employment market requires of adult job-seekers

To understand what the employment market requires of adult job-seekers and their typical attitudes towards using ICT, we interviewed two employees from the Province of Genoa's "Employment Centre" (CpI). The employment searches carried out here are not aimed at people with high-level qualifications or experience, since they usually have other channels for finding a new job.

Knowledge of the Microsoft Office suite is the main computer skill requested.

In addition, people may be required to update commercial web sites. They need to be able to use photo editing software, change the size of an image, understand that different file formats vary in size, and update online content, in other words, be able to write a text for the internet. This stems from the fact that although companies may get outside experts to set up their websites, they need to provide the content in a usable format.

ECDL is requested by many public organisations, and it gives those who have this license a greater number of points for public competitions.

ECDL is not required in the private sector. Companies just want to know that people can do their jobs.

Common difficulties : there are certainly more difficulties for those in the upper age group, in particular:

- people who have worked in the same, small company for many years, for example in a doctor's practice or as an administrative assistant preparing quotes and invoices. Many small companies still used paper and faxes until very recently;
- people returning to work after several years out, usually women who gave up work when they had children.

These people should understand that improving their skills by learning how to use Excel or Word will not significantly increase the employability of a 45 to 50-year-old. They will simply be acquiring what are considered basic skills.

Autonomy?

This introduction was designed to outline who we are talking about when we talk of the Over 50s and ICT.

What is our first reflection? It's linked to how Gianco and Titti solved their boiler problem.

They didn't get flustered, even though they didn't know how to record a noise and send it by email. Instead they asked their 44-year-old daughter to go to their house with her I-phone to record the noise and email it to the Company.

Although they are not completely autonomous, the couple were indirectly aware of the possibilities offered by computers, and they knew how to handle this unusual situation. This is the first, important aspect of training the Over 50s, and one we shouldn't overlook. They don't necessarily need to be able to use a computer themselves, but they should understand what can be done today.

Autonomy is a much-used word. The original meaning of the word is not linked to what most people think it is today, that is, doing things by oneself. The word actually comes from two Greek words: auto and nomos. Nomos means "law": so autonomy really means deciding things for ourselves, based on our own "laws".

To do this people need to understand the possibilities of ITC rather than merely gaining manual skills or technical know-how.



Matter of perspective

The famous Italian scholar Umberto Eco, whom many of you will know as the author of the acclaimed novel *In the name of the rose*, although he is primarily a scholar, has often spoken of how students approach "philosophy" at school. "How can we make them see how many centuries there are between St Augustine (born in 354) and St Thomas Aquinas (born in 1225)? No one thinks about it, because they study them both during the same year. But there are eight centuries, the same as between St Thomas Aquinas and ourselves." (Umberto Eco)

This process of grouping people together is applied not only to the great philosophers, but also closer to home, although on a smaller scale.

People who, like me, like many of us in this room today, are around 50, often have parents who are around 70/75: the difference between the two age groups is obvious. But more and more people are living to 90 and beyond, and there is a big difference between a 70-year-old and a 90-year-old.

So talking about the Over 50s can have the same effect on us as Umberto Eco's observation about school children studying philosophy, making them lose their sense of time. The term "Over 50s" covers an age group which now stretches for almost 50 years. During the first 50 years of our lives we go through a very large number of phases: babies, children, teenagers, young adults...

What does technology have to do with all this?

The first home computers became available back in the early 1980s. People who were 20 or 30 at the time are now around 50 or 60.

Today's 20-year-olds think that everyone over a certain age is unable to use a computer, "grouping together" the experience of the over 50s with the over 70s or even the over 90s...

There's an equally common perception that women are even less confident about using computers than men.

It must be said that a vicious circle has been created, encouraged by the many projects aimed at helping the elderly to use ICT and encouraging girls and women to study and work in the sciences.

Constantly talking about the need to encourage computer skills reinforces the idea that our computer skills are inadequate. Similarly, emphasising the small number of women and girls studying for IT degrees or working in science promotes the idea that they are less interested in science and have a lower ability towards it.

How can we highlight the differences in using ICT among diverse age groups? How can we show that men and women have the same ability to use ICT and explain that the problems lie elsewhere, such as having the financial means to access a computer or the "hidden curricula" in many courses of study?

First we need to find out how this age group uses computers. Most scientific studies were carried out on students (often science undergraduates) or professionals in the late 1980s, with a significant number in the 1990s. I've mentioned "scientific" research because it enables us to observe lines of argument without stereotypes or prejudices (although it has been demonstrated that certain prejudices have actually influenced researchers in their work). Even today, when we read about scientific research in the newspapers or on the internet we are seeing things through the eyes of journalists with preconceived ideas, leading them to alter in some ways what the research actually said.



Often carried out on school and university students and frequently in Anglo-Saxon countries, the research has investigated various aspects of people's approaches to computers, including potential differences between how men and women use them.

The results of this research have always been contradictory. Some articles highlight the differences (often in favour of men), while others find none at all. Over the years the differences seem to have become blurred. It is now widely known that there are absolutely no differences between "digital natives".

But people who started using the first Commodores in the early 80s, when the first wave of research into computer use began, had already been using them for ten years or so. Unless they were professionals in the sector, it was almost impossible for them to be included in a scientific sample or study on their relationship with computers.

So we know little about the age group who first encountered computers when they had already finished (or were just finishing) their studies. These people therefore learned how to use a computer by themselves or by taking a course, and they have had many years to practise. Today this age group is around 45 to 65.

Older people certainly might have learnt how to use a computer, but they will have had fewer years to practise and will have gained fewer skills. Official data on the percentages of people using computers shows that the numbers tail off sharply over the age of 65 in almost all European countries.

A positive relationship with the computer

We set out to discover more about the people in this rather unique age group.

These people studied and sometimes worked for a few years, never imagining that an object called a computer would one day become part of their lives.

These people who were curious when they first encountered a computer; they learned how to use it and did not give up even when they faced difficulties or barriers.

These people who say they have a positive relationship with computers even though they are not IT professionals.

What has emerged from the interviews?

- Women and men who say they have a positive relationship with computers say the same things; they talk of similar experiences, be they positive or negative
- Some of them say they were starting to feel tired of always having to learn something new, in the face of constant, fast-moving changes. The research began 4 years ago; if you think of how social networks have evolved over this time, you'll understand that if we started the studies now, we'd have to ask very different questions, due to the rapid changes occurred since then
- There is no sense of reverence towards IT experts and technicians; in fact, many people commented that the so-called experts often found it difficult to solve problems
- Young people and students (in the case of teachers being interviewed) are not automatically perceived as experts just because they are familiar with technology. Those who had to learn basic programming back in the 1980s believe that people who don't understand the "logic" behind software are using computers passively, even though they are very active when it comes to communicating using a computer.
- Women who know how to use computers very well, are often seen as having few IT skills and have to prove themselves to overcome the prejudice among many men that women are automatically less competent.

Most importantly, the interviews have given us access to interesting material which might serve to "convince" people to use computers, or reassure people who may be anxious and not understand how they can use them in their daily lives.



Role models who are well outside the experience of the over 50s with normal lives and careers (this includes role models who are 12-year-olds, women scientists and directors of multinationals) have much less chance of convincing them.

It's much more useful to listen to people who make more ordinary and every-day use of a computer, but who appreciate them and see them as a pleasant, useful part of their lives.

This means paving the way for a new generation of over-50s role models and mentors.



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