



Forum on Lifelong Participation through Digital Technology: A summary report

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This report summarises the collective input of the individuals and organisations listed in Appendix A.



Contents

1	The Forum Process	3
2	Identifying Barriers and Enablers	4
3	Opportunities for Collaboration	7
4	Conclusion.....	8
5	Appendix A: Forum Participants	9

1 The Forum Process

The “Lifelong Participation through Digital Technology” Forum brought together representatives of key stakeholder groups with a mutual interest in supporting lifelong participation through digital technology. The Forum was intended to define areas of common interest and identify opportunities to combine resources and scale up existing initiatives.

The Forum was delivered in partnership by Per Capita and Data61 and hosted by Telstra at the Customer Insight Centre in Melbourne. Based on an online poll of participants, carried out prior to the Forum, the following issues were chosen as the focus for discussion:

- **Lifelong learning:** Globally increasing education levels, combined with the impacts of automation will mean that in the future, workers will need to reskill and upskill more often to maintain employability. Digital technology (and in particular the internet), provides immediate access to a wide range of information. How do we ensure older people are confident to access and utilise these digital learning resources?
- **Supporting transitions for mature workers:** Mature workers who are less digitally literate are highly vulnerable to labour market disruptions (e.g., due to automation). How do we help them transition to new roles in the digital economy or identify new ways of generating income in the digital economy?
- **Digital inclusion:** Some of the factors that limit or encourage digital inclusion are the financial cost of accessing technology, issues of privacy and security, and digital literacy. What are the others and how do we ensure these issues do not become barriers to lifelong participation through digital technology?

Forum participants self-selected into the break-out groups, according to which topic was of most interest to them. In the first session, these groups were tasked with developing a list of key enablers and barriers (for lifelong learning, mature worker transitions and digital inclusion). In the second session, participants were asked to identify where there was opportunity to work collaboratively (adopting a collective impact approach), who should be involved and how to structure the collaboration.

The Forum was facilitated by Geoff Sharp, Associate Consultant at Collaboration for Impact. CSIRO’s Data61 presented the findings from their report on “Lifelong Participation through Digital Technology” which provided context for the Forum. The Forum concluded with a video-conference presentation from Helen Milner OBE, Chief Executive of the Good Things Foundation (a UK-based charity working to support digital inclusion globally).

Below, we summarise the key findings emerging from the Forum discussions. These represent the collective input of Forum participants, who are listed in Appendix A of this report. All forum participants were given the opportunity to review and make changes to this report prior to publication.

2 Identifying Barriers and Enablers

Similar barriers and enablers were identified across the three topics (lifelong learning, transitions for mature workers and digital inclusion), perhaps reflecting the fact that there is commonality in the mechanisms supporting (and hindering) lifelong participation through digital technology. Below we summarise these themes.

Key barriers:

- 1. Fear and lack of confidence:** Key factors underlying older Australians' reluctance to engage with digital technology are fear and a lack of confidence. In some cases, previous experience with older and less user-friendly technology has left them with a fear of making a mistake or 'breaking' the technology. Others lack confidence that they have the skills needed to engage with the latest technology. Fear and confidence are also an issue for mature workers who become unemployed due to automation or other technological developments that disrupt traditional industries. They may not know how to describe their existing technological skills and experience in job applications, nor how their aptitudes, skills and experience match up with current employment opportunities. Lack of confidence in using digital technology can also be a barrier for this group since digital literacy is valued by most employers. It also means they can find it difficult to search and apply for jobs using online platforms.
- 2. Perceived lack of relevance:** Efforts to support digital literacy through formal training are hindered by the fact that many older Australians do not understand how digital technology is relevant for them. Consequently, they are reluctant to invest in an internet connection or participate in a course. There is also a broader lack of awareness (in Australian society) about the importance of lifelong learning, especially when it comes to investing in ongoing formal education and learning for older workers and retirees.
- 3. Cost:** The cost of accessing and maintaining digital technology is a significant barrier for many older Australians, especially those living on a low income or in regional and remote areas. The cost of digital inclusion extends beyond paying for a device and a connection, since over the long term it can also involve accessing technical support (troubleshooting, repairs) and upgrading software and equipment on a regular basis. Lack of low cost internet connection packages means that many older Australians choose not to invest in a household internet connection. This means that when they are forced to access complex online services (e.g., to submit a job application) they incur additional costs in transport to hubs and libraries to engage with them. In consequence, older Australians can end up under further stress or more disconnected.
- 4. Digital literacy:** While there is considerable variability in the digital literacy of older Australians, on average they tend to be less skilled and knowledgeable in the use of digital technology. This is seen to be a major factor in their lower level of engagement with digital technology. However, levels of digital literacy in the population at large are also variable, even though it is often assumed that people in the workforce will be technologically proficient. Less digitally literate workers may perform adequately within their existing work

role, as a result of being able to access in-house technological support. However, when they leave the workplace (as they approach retirement) these individuals may struggle to engage independently with the many opportunities that are provided by digital technology. While the level of digital literacy required varies according to an individual's objectives (what they want to be able to do), in general, higher levels of digital literacy will be required for more options in later life.

Key enablers:

- 1. Low cost access to personalised face-to-face help and support:** When learning to use technology, older people value having access to free (or inexpensive), personalised, face to face support. Formal digital literacy training tends to be delivered in the form of group classes at scheduled times. However, class participants may struggle to use the technology once the class is finished and they are alone. As an example, older people can attend a class with machines already set up for use, then return home and not know how to access relevant programs on their computer. Although younger family members can be an important source of support outside formal training, many older people prefer to access personalised support from someone who is closer in age, who may be more understanding of their circumstances. Professional one-on-one support is often too expensive to access on a regular basis, so the availability of inexpensive personal support within their own community is especially important in assisting older people to stay engaged and continue to use digital technology.
- 2. Exposure and play with digital technology:** Giving older people unstructured and unpressured exposure to digital technology is valuable in breaking down fear and helping them to discover how digital technology might be useful in their lives. One participant described an initiative that was being used in her workplace to open up employees' thinking about ways of using digital technology and improve their digital literacy. This immersive experience digital learning laboratory allows employees to 'play' and experiment with a wide range of technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality and touch (not keyboard and screen). Being able to play with technology helps to demystify it and allows users to explore ways the technology might be relevant to them.
- 3. Ethical technology design:** The benefits derived from technology are improved when organisations consciously adopt an ethical approach to its design and implementation. In the context of lifelong participation, two areas are especially important. Firstly, the design of technology needs to take into account the needs and desires of older Australians. Co-design initiatives, which connect technology developers with older Australians and give older Australians a voice in the design process, are helping to ensure that this need is met. Secondly, when organisations invest in automation they need to ensure that workers who are displaced by this technology are supported to find alternative and meaningful work roles. Establishing standards for the ethical and responsible introduction of automation will be important in managing the impact of digital disruption in the workplace.
- 4. Existing community infrastructure:** Valuable community infrastructure to support digital inclusion already exists. This includes places, platforms and volunteer networks ranging from 'Men's Sheds', to local libraries to Seniors' Computer Clubs to aged and community services. This infrastructure serves multiple functions. It provides a place where older people can connect with one another and with technology. Some also provide training sessions and opportunities to explore new technology in an informal, unpressured way, with the needs of the older user in mind. The opportunity to access guidance and support through one-on-one learning in these safe and familiar environments is especially important.

3 Opportunities for Collaboration

After discussing enablers and barriers to lifelong participation, the break out groups reconvened to discuss how a collaborative approach might be used to address some of the barriers to lifelong participation. In these discussions, several pathways for impact were identified:

1. **Alliance for digital inclusion:** The Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance was identified as an important channel for supporting digital inclusion and lifelong learning. Several forum participants were already members of the alliance. Membership of the alliance is open to any organisation that shares an interest in reducing the digital divide and enabling greater social and economic participation for all. The alliance network was created in order to harness the collective skills, knowledge and capabilities of organisations across the country and is intended to reduce duplication of effort (e.g. associated with the development of training content). The alliance uses a collaborative impact framework (supported by a backbone organisation) and is beginning to map the range of actors and initiatives supporting digital inclusion in Australia.
2. **Digital Literacy for Older Australians program** – The Australian office of the Good Things Foundation has been appointed National Network Manager under the Department of Social Services new ‘Digital Literacy for Older Australians’ program. In this role they provide training and resources to support community organisations that deliver one-on-one, face-to-face digital training and support to older Australians. Any not for profits providing free support to at least three seniors on a monthly basis are eligible to join the network and apply for funding under the program. One time payments of \$1,500 are available for members of the “Be Connected” network to support 30 older people to develop digital skills over a 10-month period. Additional grants will be available in the future. The program will run until 2020 and over this period is expected to provide \$20 million of funding.
3. **Local government and libraries:** Local government, and libraries in particular, were identified as key backbone organisations for digital inclusion. Their local focus and trusted status makes them well placed to test small scale initiatives and support the roll out of successful initiatives more broadly.
4. **Multiple-use technology investment:** Data61 is investing in mobile virtual reality technology which has the potential for wider use. The investment by Data61 will be primarily used to engage visitors and potential customers in simulations of metal 3D printing, bushfire spread models, and other data science applications. There is an opportunity to give this technology a dual purpose, by making it available as a community-wide resource for older Australians. This will increase the utilisation of the equipment and build upon findings that touch and interactive technology are more confidently engaged with by older Australians in comparison to conventional keyboard-based computing.
5. **Transitions for mature workers:** More rapid technology-driven changes to work and work arrangements were seen to necessitate a focus on supporting transitions for mature workers. Older workers are at greater risk of being made redundant when organisations downsize and they are less likely to find alternative employment than younger workers. Often they end up leaving the workforce altogether and retiring early, causing considerable

financial pressure and disadvantage in old age. Mature workers at risk of disruption (tomorrow's older Australians as well as today's) will need support, both in understanding what opportunities are available to them and in building the capability to engage with these opportunities. To address this need, digital inclusion efforts will need to be joined up with broader employment and educational strategies, requiring input and involvement from additional stakeholders (beyond those represented at the Lifelong Participation Forum).

6. **Building an evidence base:** Being able to demonstrate the social and economic benefits derived from digital inclusion would help stakeholders to gain funding to scale up existing initiatives. Ideally, benefits need to be demonstrated both at an individual level (for the older Australian) and at the organisational or government level (e.g. cost savings derived from being able to deliver more services online). However, the combination of evidence-based research and stories is most powerful in communicating the benefits to be derived from improving digital inclusion.

4 Conclusion

Existing initiatives provide strong networks and resources to support digital literacy and inclusion for older Australians. They are playing a key role in connecting older Australians with new technology and breaking down barriers to access (such as lack of exposure to technology, fear of technology and lack of training). However, many organisations are reliant on volunteer efforts and short-term funding. The collaborative impact approach being adopted by the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance offers one mechanism for connecting efforts, reducing duplication and building an evidence base as to the benefits of digital inclusion. The “Be Connected” network established by the Good Things Foundation can also assist with scaling up these initiatives, since members can apply for grant funding under the Department of Social Services Digital Literacy for Older Australians program. However, these initiatives mostly focus on supporting older Australians who are retired and digitally excluded.

In the future, many existing workers will be transitioning out of the workforce, either voluntarily or involuntarily due to the technological disruption of jobs, and will need to find alternative sources of income and/or meaningful activities and connections. Many are not aware of, or sufficiently empowered to engage independently with, the emerging opportunities created by developments in digital technology such as independent work arrangements, micro-enterprise, social entrepreneurship and online education. Furthermore, addressing this issue requires input and investment from a broader set of stakeholders. Thus, there appears to be a gap in terms of establishing an agenda and collaborative network to support less digitally literate mature workers to make successful transitions to new ways of working and participating in society.

5 Appendix A: Forum Participants

Organisation/stakeholder group	Representative
Australian Library and Information Association	Vanessa Little
Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association	Nan Bosler
Brotherhood of St Laurence	Ian Paroissien
Collective Impact Forum	Geoff Sharp
Council on the Ageing Victoria	Ronda Held
Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation	Simon Dunstall Claire Mason Elinor Bester Shanae Burns
Department of Health and Human Services	Heather Birch
Federation University	Philip Taylor
Good Things Foundation	Helen Milner
Infoxchange & 641 DI	Brendan Fitzgerald
La Trobe University	Clare Wilding
Per Capita	Emma Dawson Myfan Jordan
Retiree advocate	Arnold Bates
Reluctant retiree	Basil Theophilis
Siemens	Sue Carter
Telstra	Nancie-Lee Robinson
Willing Older Workers	Marilyn King

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