

Submission to the Global Digital Compact April 2023

About AARP

AARP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit association based in the US dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for all as we age. Since its founding in 1958, AARP has delivered value to its members through advocacy, information, and service. As a social change organization, we work tirelessly to fulfill our vision of a society in which everyone ages with dignity and purpose. While being a domestic organization, AARP has always had an international perspective and we pride ourselves on being a leader on health and economic security issues and a respected global source of information and advocacy.

For additional information or questions, please contact:

Michael Phillips | Director, Technology Strategy & Relationships

mphillips@aarp.org | 601 E Street NW, Washington DC, 20049 | 202-434-3109

Summary

Increasing digital connection for older adults is critical to achieving universal internet connectivity and represents one of the shared global challenges of the twenty-first century.

A 2022 global survey found 27 percent of people over 55 never use the internet, and another 31 percent only use it occasionally. The gap in internet access means that the current state of digital connectivity can reinforce inequalities rather than break them down and create barriers to the ingredients of modern healthy aging such as healthcare, financial services, and social connection.

Beyond the multitude of benefits to individuals that connectivity can provide, there is also a strong economic case for getting older adults online. Older Adults <u>are the wealthiest age cohort</u> in the world. <u>By 2050</u>, the annual economic contributions of the 50-plus age group in the US will triple, from \$8.3 trillion to \$26.8 trillion. Despite older adults' potential to contribute to society economically and socially as innovators, mentors, caregivers, and leaders, they lack equitable and reliable internet access in both developed and developing economies. In developing countries, internet penetration is often far lower. Such digital connectivity gaps are not only to the detriment of older adults but are also a missed opportunity for their communities and countries.



AARP's submission to the Global Digital Compact examines three key barriers to digital adoption by older adults and aggregates recommendations that were surfaced through the Network for the 'Digital Inclusion of Older Adults'.

The Network for the Digital Inclusion of Older Persons

In an effort to address these issues and help close the gaps, in 2022 AARP convened a series of roundtables with experts from governments, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations, focusing on three key pillars for achieving the digital inclusion of aging populations:

- 1. **Broadband Access**: Today, broadband is seen as the foundation for an internetdependent world. However, uptake is undermined by barriers to physical access as well as issues of affordability that impact older adults disproportionately.
- 2. **Digital Skills**: Even when connected to the internet, many older adults face a significant but surmountable skills gap that limits the utility of digital devices and services. Adequate and appropriate training can help ensure that older adults get online and get the most out of the digital realm.
- 3. **Inclusive Design**: Design processes often tend to treat older adults and their needs as afterthoughts. Involving older adults of all backgrounds and abilities from the start, and adapting to their design needs, can make digital ecosystems work better for everyone.

The 'Network for the Digital Inclusion of Older Persons' represents a diverse group of stakeholders supporting the United Nation's Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. It calls for the global community to work together to connect all people by the year 2030 by ensuring digital inclusion for all. The convenings of this Network were to identify successful models, potential solutions, and recommendations addressing digital inclusion barriers for older persons. The network of global experts explored accomplishing this task through partnerships, technologies, metrics, programs, and policies.

Broadband Access

Access to affordable high-speed internet is a major barrier to connectivity for older adults, especially in rural and low-income contexts. Developing countries lag behind high-income economies in infrastructure needed to get people online. Urban areas tend



to have greater internet access than rural areas, and older adults tend to account for a higher proportion of the population in rural areas than in urban areas. Broadband accessibility can mitigate the challenges that older adults face and contribute to the expansion of their engagement and participation in life.

Internet access remains unaffordable for many around the world. For example, the average cost of fixed-broadband access in 2018 in Africa was equivalent to <u>64 percent</u> of average monthly income. Adequate infrastructure, while necessary, is insufficient for closing the digital inclusion gap among older adults if internet subscriptions remain financially out of reach.

Recommendations

Leverage public private partnerships: No single entity or sector can fix the broadband gap alone.

Reframe broadband access in terms of economic gains: Demonstrating the additional benefits of broadband access, not strictly the costs of its provision, can increase public and private sector support for increasing access.

Access means more than infrastructure: Research during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that broadband internet <u>connectivity paired with training</u> leads to positive social outcomes for older adults who were previously offline.

Increase awareness of benefits: While access to technology has become a human right, many older people lack access, and not know why it would provide benefit.

Ensure measurement is written into policy: "If you can't measure it, you can't achieve it."

Adopt a framework for measurement that spans five dimensions: Funding for expansion, regulatory constraints, availability, profitability & design (FRAPD).

Promote models for public-private collaboration: The Alliance for an Affordable Internet has global sponsors such as Google, Amazon, Cisco, Ericsson, Intel and Huawei, among many others, with efforts to expand low-cost access.

Building Digital Skills

Successful digital inclusion of older adults is dependent on providing individuals with the digital skills needed for an increasingly online world. People who learned to use digital technologies later in life often lag behind those who acquire digital skills earlier in life



such as how to use a computer, internet browser, and search engine. This can reduce the utility of online spaces for older adults or shut them out entirely. A 2021 survey of U.S. adults over 50, for example, found that 54 percent wanted better skills to use digital devices but 37 percent said they lacked confidence in using technology. This skills gap can manifest in many ways in daily life, from an inability to access an online portal for public services, to failure to use mobile device reminders to take medication, to an inability to apply for a new job or connect with a community group. The skills gap can lead to lower earnings as well as lowered consumption. Older adults are more likely to lack the basic digital skills that are critical for participation in many jobs, even when they possess superior literacy and numeracy skills, compared to younger cohorts. Likewise, a disconnection from digital platforms can lead to a lack of awareness wherein individuals simply do not have access to information that could improve their lives, from opportunities for low-cost broadband access, to e-learning classes, to the tools to search for jobs online. A lack of trust also contributes to less participation online, as older age groups are often targets of and particularly concerned with cybercrime such as fraud and theft of personal information.

Recommendations

Leverage varied points of entry: Successful training programs provide varied points of entry to older adults, meaning approaches that offer numerous options for contact and reflect the different skill sets of seniors.

Involve trusted institutions: Learning opportunities work best when delivered by institutions that older adults are familiar with and tend to trust, such as a local library, religious network, or senior center.

Tailor training: Optimizing the approachability of training for older adults is critical to maximizing its uptake. To be effective, digital literacy programs require a programmatic framework that is well matched to the specific needs of a community and designed to boost the confidence of older users.

Keep pace with new technology: Skills training tends to lag behind the latest technology, which leaves older adults without the ability to properly use new devices or services, while old equipment may lack functionality or suffer from increased cybersecurity risks.

Effective scalable training requires a 3-tiered approach: 1) a funder; 2) a curriculum provider and program manager; and 3) a local delivery partner.

Help overcome the stigma of learning something new: Try devices in broadly accessed locations like libraries and/or restaurants – within the comfort zone of older individuals who may be there already.



Start with connection to friends and family: People want to learn in order to interact and play with grandchildren and people they love.

Co-design new technology with the participation of older adults: Under the inclusive design mantra, "nothing for us, without us".

Create individual lifelong learning accounts: Example: a free educational service (with points) that matches interests at any age, enabling older adults to acquire skills or knowledge that improve their quality of life.

Create a scalable digital navigator/ambassador role for older adults: Partnering with stores to promote technology adoption in different contexts.

Build a 'digital well': Create community access centers to deliver the usage and adoption resources they might need. A well symbolizes a place where people come and congregate to relieve thirst.

Combat ageism among tech and service providers: For example, provide terminology guides for new users who "don't speak 'geek speak'".

Leverage skills of older persons to train others: Successes with one-on-one training on digital literacy, using older women to train their peers.

Online Safety is a skill: Digital literacy must include training individuals to protect themselves from fraud and exploitation online. Fraud is a global problem.

Mirror tech literacy programs that focus on school-aged children: Example: Comcast Internet Essentials or OATS-provided training materials for low-income older adults, especially to expand Internet access.

Leverage national organizations that support wellness and independence: Example: The Veterans Administration in the US has various initiatives to expand broadband access to veterans with a special focus on telehealth.

Volunteer Cyberacademy: This has been launched in 18-19 countries abroad. Micro learnings are useful in training and education of young people and can work with older adults.

Implement a system of social networks to help adoption: Example: tech literacy in Japan is notably high and baby boomers are relatively comfortable with technology. Japan has networks to assist older people in the use of technology and accessing services.

Add a national tech support help line for older adults: Example: Israel has a national program for digital literacy for older adults that includes working with people who are homebound and providing a free help desk for people who have completed skills training.



Age-Inclusive Design

Digital design processes often fail to account for the many disparate needs and abilities of older adults. For example, <u>nearly half</u> of older adults in the United States experience technological barriers that interfere with social connections. Rather than an inclusive approach to design that accommodates all, technology is almost always made to accommodate the modern general user who is already online and well adapted to the digital realm. The rare exception is assistive digital technology, which tends to offer a drastically different digital experience and reduced functionality.

Between these two ends of the spectrum are many other levels of skill and ability to use digital tools. Making a digital world that works for everyone requires design processes that have everyone—including different demographics and marginalized groups—in mind from the start.

Ageism can lead many to equate old age with inability, thus perpetuating stereotypes and incorrect assumptions about aging populations, such as the false notion that older adults are ill-suited to the digital realm and incapable of using technology. Additionally, disabilities are prevalent among older adults—affecting more than 46 percent of those over 60 globally—and represent some of the primary hurdles for getting aging populations online and using digital devices. Older adults with disabilities face a vast array of challenges, from visual and hearing loss to cognitive decline and learning limitations. Design process currently marginalize and negatively impact older adults through the reduced functionality of digital devices or failure to cater to specific needs.

Devices and digital experiences are often simply not designed with older adults in mind, and continued high barriers to using new and emerging products may discourage them from using digital tools entirely.

Recommendations

Elevate design-for-all concepts: Companies and universities can achieve an optimal user experience for people across age groups by being more intentional about the digital inclusion of older consumers and maintaining a focus on the unique needs of 50-plus users throughout the development process.

Involve older adults: Similar to peer-training with digital skills, involving older adults in the product design lifecycle, including co-creation, testing and feedback, can break down misconceptions and expose challenges for a range of groups that may not be obvious to designers and developers.



Include new interfaces such as voice tech and natural language processes:

Emerging technologies often mean older adult users will be more capable of controlling their devices.

Emphasize ability: At a broader level, age-inclusive design should be reconceptualized not as a burden but as a route to enabling and accessing the unique skills of everyone, especially older adults.

Consider the pace of change: The continuous cycle of updates creates adoption challenges, interoperability issues, training challenges and general frustration.

Form a consistent legislative approach to boosting age-inclusive design: Consider a parallel to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1980.

Legislative initiatives need to include effective standards that build trust: Spam laws are not doing a good job of preventing spam.

Promote diversification and representation of older adults in the private sector: Add older adults, including women, on boards and to product design teams.

Transfer the lessons learned from accessibility initiatives to design and testing for the aging market segment.

Engage designers of products to teach older digital skills classes.

Create age-friendly technology metrics to track adoption.

Speak their language—literally and figuratively: Digital devices and services need to be attuned to local contexts. Governments and internet providers can ensure that digital products and resources are available in local languages

Cross-Cutting Recommendations

Focus on where inequalities are greatest: Key to addressing development targets such as SDG-1 (ending poverty) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) is prioritizing those groups where disparities are most acute.

Build coalitions: Digital inclusion of older adults is a shared responsibility requiring the collaboration of public, private, and non-profit entities at local, national, and international levels.

Recognize the business and social imperatives: By adopting strategies that address the gaps in digital access, skills, and design, companies can both further corporate social responsibility goals, by helping improve the livelihoods of aging populations, and access a burgeoning new market opportunity.



Develop consistent data and benchmarks: Understanding of the global benefits of digital inclusion and the national and regional gaps that persist is hindered by inconsistent data across and within countries, and varying conceptions of what qualifies as adequate digital access.

Utilize multiple metrics: Across access, affordability and adoption especially identifying the gap between access and usage.

Measure digital readiness gaps: Crafting population assessments possibly modeled on a Pew research report about the use of tech tools to pursue learning online, categorizing individuals from 'least ready' to 'most ready.'

Match financial incentives and programs connection to adoption: This is needed to ensure projects don't fail due to poor access.

Measure the connection between technology access and health equity: For example, use of technology that could address or assist for chronic conditions like diabetes, heart disease, or dementia. WHO identifies Social Determinants of Health (SDH), but these do not include technology access that could help manage chronic conditions.

Uplift positive stories, both at individual and population levels: For example, the Web Accessibility Initiative offers stories about specific, vision, hearing, and cognitive limitations. W3C notes that that there are 1 billion people globally with disabilities and represent spending power of \$1 trillion.

Increasing points of entry: Stakeholders must offer a complete on-ramp to digital use and literacy, but one that has many doors of entry. Not everyone has some same goals – and may only need a subset of capabilities with limited features.

Connect programs to the increased use of telehealth and remote patient monitoring (RPM): These changes require increased access to high-speed Internet services, and/or smartphone devices for telehealth interactions.

Help private sector participate and be part of the solution: Allowing other sectors and categories participate – the private sector should know that access is good business practice to help people use their technologies.

Looking Ahead

As much of daily life moves online—from work opportunities to essential services such as healthcare and banking—inclusion in the digital world has become critical to the wellbeing of people around the world. This is especially true for older adults, who face acute risks from exclusion from online spaces. As this analysis shows, digital inclusion is an area ripe for public-private collaboration, inclusive design, and innovation. Working



together, governments, internet service providers, and other stakeholders, can support older adults to be healthy, fulfilled, and productive in their later lives.