Chapter 1.31
Overcoming the Digital Divide

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THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

We all know that technology has become a dominant force in today's society for people of all ages. However, certain elements of society have less access to technology than others. In the literature, discussions and research on these discrepancies tend to focus on factors such as gender, sex, socioeconomic status, race, education, and employment. Occasionally, age is taken into consideration. In reviewing online articles related to the digital divide, it appears that there are many more articles, reports, and projects that focus on factors other than age. Few looked at the impact of the digital divide on senior citizens. One article, "The Internet and Older Adults" (U.S. Administration on Aging, 2004), reports that:

Senior citizens comprise 13% of the U.S. population, but just 4% of the U.S. Internet population. Since their numbers are so small, there has not been much research about what these 'wired seniors' are doing online and how they feel about the Internet. It turns out that seniors who have Internet access benefit greatly from the resources available online—communicating with family, researching health information, tracking their investments—all from the comfort of their home or senior center. (paragraph 2)

The term "digital divide" is often heard and freely used, but what is it? It has been defined by Carvin (2000) as: "…the gap between those people and communities with access to information technology and those without it. Yet, the fact is there are many divides, characterized by community, ethnic, economic, and age groups." He goes on to add that "households earning incomes over $75,000 are over 20 times more likely to have home Internet access than those at the lowest income levels" (Carvin, 2000, paragraph 1).

This gives us a double, negative impact on financially disadvantaged seniors; they are in the low income group so they are in the bottom of the digital divide, and they are also elder citizens who did not grow up with or use computers. This

is a group that needs special attention if the gap is not to widen beyond repair.

Senior Citizens and the Digital Divide

In "Minimizing the Digital Divide and the Inter-Generation Gap," Aphek (2004) states: "New technologies have created a situation rather unknown in human history wherein young children master a skill much needed by adults in general, and seniors in particular" (paragraph 2). The impact of this is that we have many older Americans who do not own and do not know how to use a personal computer for even the basic skills of sending and receiving e-mail, and searching the Internet.

In the article, "The Internet and Older Adults" (U.S. Administration on Aging, 2004), we find that there is data to support the observation that most seniors do not use computers:

Lots of seniors engage with life by reading news or pursuing a hobby, but very few have followed the lead of younger Americans and shifted those activities online. Most seniors do not use computers and do not think they are missing out on anything by not going online.

- While 56% of all Americans go online, only 15% of Americans over the age of 65 have access to the Internet.
- Fully 81% of people who say they definitely will not go online are over 50.
- Fifty-six percent of those over age 65 say they definitely will not go online, compared to just 6% who say they definitely plan to go online." (paragraph 3)

A few states have not only recognized this gap, but have tried to do something about it. Governor Underwood and Microsoft worked together in 1999 in West Virginia in "Bridging the 'Digital Divide' in Rural America: Microsoft and West Virginia Create First State Technology Training Initiative for Older Adults" (Microsoft, 1999). It was reported online on July 22, 1999, that Microsoft donated $125,000 worth of hardware, software, curriculum, and support to the newly established Seniors Technology Training Program.

One of the program's graduates, 65-year-old Marilyn D. Tipler of Charleston, West Virginia, said: "This program is great for seniors. Using a computer has helped my career and has been invaluable for keeping in touch with my friends and relatives in Ontario" (paragraph 4).

Craig Spoesle, director of the Microsoft Senior Initiative, said that "seniors are in danger of being left behind on the information superhighway, but today the roads are open to them in West Virginia, enhancing their independent living, creativity, and community" (paragraph 3).

In another state, Pennsylvania's State Representative, Daylin Leach, helped seniors there "…cross the 'digital divide' and (he) works to help the less fortunate learn computer skills," as the article's title states (Caton, 2003). Working with TeamChildren, he helped get six refurbished computers "donated to the Upper Merion Senior Center through a joint effort between Leach, TeamChildren, and Conrad Cruse, a retired professor who runs the computer program at the senior center" (paragraph 2).

Although the case that seniors need to be able to use computers may have been made, the story relayed by Stover in "Technologies that Help Senior Citizens Utilize the Internet and Computers" is so appropriate that it has to be shared (Stover, n.d.):

At about 70 years old, my father began to express a strong desire to learn about computers. Now granted, he didn't have a computer, nor had he ever set finger on a computer, but that seemed irrelevant. He had actually never even used a typewriter before (he had always had a secretary or my mom to help him). Retired and alone he had no secretary or wife to help him with his business

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