

Chapter 5.29

Helping Close the Digital Divide for Financially Disadvantaged Seniors

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has become an essential element of all society today. Those who can access the World Wide Web have become active participants in the Information Age. Unfortunately, many individuals throughout the world do not have ready access to the needed technology. Furthermore, they do not have the required knowledge and skills to use the technology and cannot participate actively. As a result, this has created a world of information haves and have-nots. In this chapter, after examining the concept of the digital divide, data is presented that shows that those with low incomes and those who are older have little access to technology and the use of computers. Low-income seniors are especially limited in their opportunities to own a computer, and they seldom have the skills needed to use one for e-mail, search the Internet, and so forth, even if they visit a public library where they could use a computer without any cost. Various approaches being used to help seniors learn how to use computers are described, and then the chapter

focuses on two projects that have proved to be successful in this effort. SeniorNet is a national organization that helps establish learning centers around the country. The approach used at one such center, located at Nova Southeastern University in South Florida, requires seniors to pay for their courses. A second project is known as SeniorComp and is supported by private foundation funds. Ten low-income senior citizens are selected for each group of seniors in this project. They are given a complete Dell computer system, and their tuition is paid to take four of the SeniorNet courses. At the end of the fourth course, ownership of the computer system is turned over to the individual participant. To date, the completion rate has been 100%. The approaches used can serve as models for others to modify and use in their own communities. By adopting a similar approach, the impact of the digital divide can be significantly reduced for those low-income seniors that participate in the project. In this way, this portion of the marginal community can be empowered.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become important to all elements of society today. Those who know how to access the World Wide Web and have the equipment to enable them to do so have become active participants in the Information Age. Unfortunately, there are also many individuals throughout the world who do not have ready access to the needed technology. In addition, they do not have the knowledge and skills to use the technology to be able to participate electronically. It has developed a world of information *haves* and *have-nots*.

The gap between these two groups is commonly referred to as the *digital divide*. Those at the lower end of the digital divide are at a growing disadvantage everyday. It becomes harder and harder for them to interact with those who are involved in the Information Age. For example, the grandmother who cannot send e-mail to her grandchildren, join in an online discussion group on knitting, or even go online to find an article or a topic in which she is interested feels she is just too old to learn all *this new electronic stuff*. She misses great opportunities to become more independent and to be able to interact with her grandchildren.

Although there are a number of factors that contribute to the digital divide, the focus in this chapter will be on the impact of age and financial differences in terms of their influence on the use of technology. In addition to exploring these two particular factors that contribute to the digital divide, this chapter also contains a detailed description of two projects that can serve as examples of projects that are currently helping to overcome the digital divide for senior citizens. Many interesting statistics are provided in the government report "Falling Through the Net: Toward Digital Inclusion" (see <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fttn00/contents00.html>). This is the fourth in a series of reports called "Falling Through the Net" that began in July 1995. Information from this report and other articles

that relate to senior citizens and low income will be discussed in this chapter.

BACKGROUND

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.

The term *digital divide* is often heard and freely used, but what is it? It has been defined by Carvin (2000): "The Digital Divide, simply put, is 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" (p. 1).

A number of definitions may be found on the Internet. Four of these definitions and their sources, as retrieved from the World Wide Web on January 23, 2005, are listed in subsequent paragraphs. The digital divide is variously defined as:

The gap that exists between those who can afford technology and those who cannot. (<http://www.pixel8.com.au/training/textsite/glossary.htm>)

The risk that those with lower incomes or living in more remote areas will have access to a lower quality of telecommunications services than available to others, and as a result may not be able to adequately participate in the information economy. (<http://www.med.govt.nz/pbt/telecom/response/glossary.html>)

The gap between those individuals in our society who are computer literate and have access to information resources like the Internet and those who do not. (http://myphliputil.pearsoncmg.com/student/bp_jessup_ist_1/JessupGlossary.html)

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