Chapter 5.14
Older People, the Internet, and Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world the proportion of older people is growing, and this group is accessing the World Wide Web more and more for a variety of purposes including e-mail, finance, health information and genealogy. There are several different definitions of what constitutes an "older person," but for the purposes of this chapter we will define older people as those over sixty-five years of age and no longer in the full-time workforce. The proportion of older people in Australia will increase dramatically over the next twenty-five years and Foskey (1998) notes that since the nineteenth century there has been a "longevity revolution" in the Western world. In Australia during the past

decade the over sixty-five age group living in non-metropolitan areas has seen the greatest rate of growth (Foskey 1998).

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indicate that older people are taking up Internet technology at a rapid rate, but that their use of the Internet for electronic commerce (e-commerce) activities remains quite low, with older people forming just 1% of the total number of adult Internet shoppers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). (Unlike our definition, for statistical purposes the ABS defines older people as those who are fifty-five years of age and over.) Individual older people often have particular needs that differ from those of younger people, and it appears that use of the Internet may help with some of these. As people grow older they can become physically less mobile and could benefit if they

were able to conduct more of their financial affairs, such as banking and bill paying, from home. In other words, e-commerce has something useful to offer them. The research literature (including: Williamson, Bow, & Wale, 1996; Council on the Ageing, 2000b; Mitchell, 2000; Lloyd, 2001), however, and also data from an Older Person Focus Group in Melbourne (Council on the Ageing, 2000a), reveals significant barriers to the adoption of e-commerce by older people.

This article investigates older people's use of the GreyPath portal (www.greypath.com) and what they might get out of this use. We will argue that the people who use this portal constitute a *virtual community* of older people (Lepa & Tatnall, 2002b; 2004) and, although the site is based in Australia, this virtual community extends also to people from other parts of the world. GreyPath is, of course, not the only site designed for older people. Other sites that provide useful information and services for Australian seniors include: www. govolunteer.com.au, www.seniorcomputing.org, www.goldenage.com.au and www.liswa.wa.gov. au/websitessen.html. Sites in the USA include: www.wiredseniors.com/ and www.seniorsites. com/. From Canada www.healthservices.gov. bc.ca/seniors/sites.html and www.ottawaseniors. com/links/browse.php?cat=30 are also of interest, and this is just a small sample of the available sites around the world.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND THE INTERNET

The dictionary definition of a *community* is: "a group of people having cultural, religious, ethnic or other characteristics in common" (Collins Publishers, 1992). A virtual community is a group of people who share a common interest or bond, but rather than meeting physically they form "communities that cross geographical, social, cultural and economic boundaries" (Matathia, 1998, p. 156) and communicate via the Internet

(Matathia, 1998; Schneider & Perry, 2001, p. 10). Some examples of virtual communities on the Internet include the group of older people who share a common life stage, music lovers with an affection for a particular genre, and teenagers battling through "the trials and tribulations of adolescence" (Matathia, 1998, p. 156). Barnatt (1998) suggests that there are two categories of virtual community: off-line and online. Both categories of virtual community share common interests and bonds but online, Internet-based virtual communities today "allow a wide range of global individuals to argue, share information, make friends, and undertake economic exchanges, in a flexible and socially-compelling common on-line arena." In contrast, members of an off-line virtual community do not communicate directly with one another but are reliant on "broadcast" mediums such as newspapers, TV and radio to sustain their common interests or bonds.

The group of Australian older people who use the Web, and in the case of this article in particular the GreyPath portal, share the common bond of ageing (Bosler 2001) and can be considered to form an online virtual community. Matathia (1998) suggests that these online relationships can be every bit as strong and permanent as their "real world" counterparts. Individuals in this group, prior to accessing the Internet, would have been classified as part of the off-line community of older Australian people.

THE NEEDS OF OLDER PEOPLE

Older people have many needs, and a recent study in the United States showed a wide range of responses in terms of the concerns of older people (Wenger, 1997). It revealed that physical and mental health along with mobility concerns were paramount and showed a larger degree of consensus across the sample. Financial security is seen as particularly important by older people who, in retirement, need to be assured of adequate income

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