



Seniors and the Internet

The Internet: it's hip, trendy and 'in' — just the type of place you'd expect to find lots of . . . retired people? When the Internet first exploded in popularity it was a haven for the young because it was cool to be on the net: it was their medium.

Early surveys of Internet usage showed there was indeed a marked demarcation line in usage according to age. The Georgia Institute of Technology's Graphic, Visualization and Usability Centre (www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu/user_surveys/) in Atlanta has been surveying users since 1994, and its first analysis showed that nearly 75% of all users were 35 or younger. A mere 2% of users were 50 or older.

Fast forward 3 years, and the numbers look dramatically different. The latest survey indicates that the average Internet user is about 35 years old and almost 1 in 5 is older than 50.

"We're one of the fastest growing segments on the Internet," explains Dan Goldhar, general manager of Fifty-plus.Net (www.fifty-plus.net) and an executive with the Canadian Association of Retired Persons (CARP).

"We look at the Internet as a wonderful empowering technology," he

says. "It is a tool that lets 'postemployed' people interact with a world beyond the immediate in a way that was never possible before. It removes barriers of time, distance and physical limitation and opens up a new world."

Goldhar agrees that the over-50 crowd is generally slower to embrace new technology and he thinks this is partly due to some popular fears about the Internet over issues such as privacy and security. There are also concerns about pornography and uncertainty over electronic commerce.

"It just takes a little time to show people that you can't break anything by going on the Net," he said. "And yes, pornography is out there, but it's no different from in the corner store: you have to go looking for it to get it."

For seniors, one of the most attractive aspects of today's Internet is that it puts friends, family and communities of people at their fingertips. Physicians may want to make Internet-savvy seniors in their practices aware of general discussion areas, such as the newsgroup 'soc.retirement' or Fifty plus.Net's email list (to join go to www.fifty-plus.net/resource/main.dhtml).

At the Fifty-plus.Net site, the official site for CARP, seniors can find links to a world of information, everything from health care and genealogy to gardening to retirement planning.

There are also sites like the Online Care Guide (www.thecareguide.com/), an electronic resource that helps seniors weave through the maze of care options available in Ontario. Talking With Your Doctor (www.medaccess.com/seniors/twyd/tw_toc.htm) is an online guide that helps older people deal with their physician, while the National Fraud Infor-

mation Centre has an online advice site for seniors (www.fraud.com/specold.htm).

The Seniors Computer Information Project (www.mbnet.mb.ca/crm/index.html) in Manitoba offers another electronic warehouse of information for the "postemployed." There's an advice section for grandparents called "Ask Great-Granny," which is a financial-planning and health line geared toward seniors.

But more than hard data are available. Jim Kirk-White (aka the Duke of Url — www.onlink.net/~krk-wyt/friends.htm) hosts a 50+ cyber-friends club that helps connect retirees from around the world. Or visit the Multimedia Grandma (Marguerite Oberle Thomas — www.mmgram.com/), who has been spreading the gospel of Net usage to fellow seniors for years from her home in Brussels, Ont. She has put together many ideas to help grandparents "go boldly forward" into the electronic age.

With the Internet, seniors are finding that age doesn't have to slow them down. They can still travel the world, only via a keyboard instead of a plane. © Michael O'Reilly

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