

Track B, Session B4: "Methods of end-use involvement in the field of social interaction and related ethical issues"

Speaker: Maria Schwarz-Woelzl, Zentrum fuer Soziale Innovation, Vienna

**Title: How to set up a win-win-situation in end-user involvement processes – the potential of participatory methods**

Authors: Maria Schwarz-Woelzl & Teresa Holocher-Ertl

Affiliation: Zentrum fuer Soziale Innovation, Vienna

Contact: [schwarz@zsi.at](mailto:schwarz@zsi.at) & [holocher@zsi.at](mailto:holocher@zsi.at)

**Abstract/Summary**

The vision of the **Go-myLife project** (AAL-2009-2-089) is to overcome the risk of loneliness of older people by providing an online social network combined with mobile technologies customised to older peoples' needs. Eliciting requirements from older people who have limited experience with ICT usage regarding innovative products that do not yet exist is a challenging process. This article describes the participatory design approach that has been employed in the Go-myLife project aiming at the elicitation of end-user needs and requirements and it presents first lessons learned from this approach.

---

**Introduction**

In our increasingly dislocated and mobile society, online social networks (SN) provide a valuable means of bridging distances and facilitating interaction and communications, especially amongst younger people. However, older people tend to miss out on these benefits, as such technology is generally developed with young people in mind. Thus, the project Go-myLife aims to improve the social life for older people through the use of online social networks combined with mobile technologies. It aims to make it easy for older people to share reciprocal emotional and instrumental support, whether they are at home or out and about; with other words: it will provide a common place for older people to meet with their social network wherever they are and encourage them to get out of the house and maintain an active role in their community.

For further project information please visit the website <http://gomylife.eu/>.

**Methods – participatory approaches for the user needs and requirements elicitation**

In order to develop an innovative mobile social network adapted to real user needs, in Go-myLife older people were involved in the project from the very beginning. In the first 15 months, seven end-user workshops (WS) were conducted, involving 23 participants aged between 55 and 75 in Austria and the UK. The workshops had two main research objectives:

1. Understanding strengths and weaknesses of existing online social network platforms from an older people's perspective.
2. Analysing contemporary interaction patterns in social networks as such and the perceived desires of older people concerning communication support.

Therefore two different workshop types were organised:

*Workshop type 1: Assessment of the strengths and pitfalls of Facebook, plus four popular senior platforms.*

Each assessment was divided into four parts:

- The participants were invited for a “walkthrough” in existing SN platforms “thinking aloud”, following specific tasks in pairs of two. Each pair received a set of materials, consisting of a “Scenario” and seven “Situation Cards” and “Situation Feedback Forms”.
- After this session, each participant was asked to complete a standardized questionnaire about the frequency of their use of new media, the usability of the assessed SN, and the added value derived from a particular SN.
- A short “storytelling walk” followed, giving the participants - again in pairs of two - an opportunity to share their experiences of modern communication media. The results supplement the findings from the questionnaires.
- At the end, a semi-structured discussion followed, where the participants talked about their experiences gained from the “walkthrough” exercise.

*Workshop type 2: Exploration of older people’s interaction patterns in their social networks.*

The workshops’ core exercise was to explore the structure, involved social groups and communication patterns of the participants’ social network.

- The participants were asked to illustrate their social networks (artefact) and to present it to the workshop group.
- In a second round, they created a group vision about the ideal network in the future (ten years later) as basis for an in-depth discussion. Group visions helped to deduce technical requirements for the Go-myLife platform.

A detailed description of the workshop methodology can be found in Deliverable 2.1 of the Go-myLife project. The results of the workshops are summarized in Deliverable 2.3. Both documents can be downloaded on the Go-myLife Website.

## **Results – why the workshops became a success**

Eliciting requirements from older people who have limited experience with ICT usage regarding innovative products that do not yet exist is a challenging process. Older people may feel reluctant to talk about their personal problems (e.g. social isolation), and they do not have the experience, which enables them to specify the technical functionalities that would help meet those needs. In tackling these challenges, we identified the following components for the successful implementation of our research methodology:

- *In order to create trust and remove fear of technology* we made the users aware of their role as “experts” in the design process. We created awareness that problems with technology can be in many cases attributed to poor product design and not to the poor knowledge of end-users. The fear of new technology was successfully eliminated by introducing the topic of new technology playfully via an adaption of the well-known game “Who wants become a millionaire?” Further, we used interactive presentation formats to keep attention and focus high.
- *In order to stimulate experiences with new technology* and to allow end-users to participate in fruitful discussions about new technology that they have not even experienced yet, we provided hands-on sessions (!) with technology to collect first experiences with new technology. During these sessions older people worked with practical scenarios, as well as photos and videos, to increase imagination and tie the technology to practical concerns of the target group’s everyday life.
- *It was important to alternate between different group sizes and question formats*; we worked with a balance of smaller groups to collect in-depth information and bigger groups to stimulate fruitful discussions. We used open as well as structured question formats.
- *We planed the elicitation carefully* as we collected sensitive information, like social isolation or loneliness and considered in our planning which viewpoint users should take

(“For me?“, “For the group?“ “For others?“). Crucial for avoiding psychological discomfort was the discussion about future fears rather than current problems. The employed methodology was tested in two explorative WS before.

- *Considering the knowledge and culture gap between end-users and researchers*, we assured the integration of the end-users’ needs in the design process of the Go-myLife product by providing designers with artefacts, descriptions, testimonials etc. that illustrated the problems end-users had with new technology. For this illustration video-sequences and personas turned out to be useful instruments. Important for the successful transition of the needs and requirements elicitation outcomes was the provision of training for designers to interact with older people appropriately.

## **Discussion**

In the following paragraph further issues with regard to a successful end-user involvement are discussed:

*The sandwich generation – the tension between family obligations and their right for time autonomy*

For one of the seven workshops mentioned above, eight people have clearly given us the commitment to participate prior to the workshop. However, due to ad hoc family related obligations (e.g. illness of a grandchild, loss of the father etc.) only two of them showed up in the morning of the workshop and explained right at the beginning that they would not participate until the end of the workshop as they had already other plans (to see an exhibition, to visit friends on the countryside). From a researcher’s perspective, this example highlights the challenges in organising a sound sample size. From the older people’s perspective, it shows that they are an important source of (spontaneous) support within their family ties, as well as the feeling of freedom – and probably for the first time in their life - to decide spontaneously how to spend their time.

*3rd and 4th agers together in one research setting – the challenges for the methodology*

Research suggests fundamental social-psychological and physical differences between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> agers (see D2.3 of the Go-myLife project) with different life perspectives and future visions. This is particularly the case when it comes to psychologically sensitive topics, such “social embeddedness” and “future perspectives” Consequently, dealing with both groups in one research setting implies to have also an alternative methodology prepared which allows to be flexible according to the actual age profile of participants.

*“Technology for older people” – a mismatch of end-users’ and researchers’ perception of the category “old age”*

Participating in a project which deals with product development for “older people”, implies for the end-users to be considered as “old” from the researchers’ perspective. However, the majority of our workshop participants were typical representatives of the so-called “Go-Goes” which are characterised by being still in good mental and physical health and still leading a busy and active social life (for categories of older people see D2.3 of the Go-myLife project). This discrepancy between older peoples’ self-perception and the research assignment rose some psychological discomfort for both parties.

## **Conclusion**

There were tasks that were perceived as challenging for the participants, which were due to the challenging nature of the topics themselves. The usage of online SNs is demanding for older people, due to usability issues, but also because of security/privacy concerns and different perceptions on how to communicate with older peoples’ social networks. Further, we had to make participants think about possible changes concerning communication within their social networks with increasing age and how to address these challenges; a challenge

as (older) people may be reluctant to talk about personal problems and the difficulty to think about future technological innovations.

However, we can conclude that the agenda of both workshops was useful for addressing the research questions and the methods used were adequate for the target group of older people.

But also the participants themselves found that the workshops were a source of personal enrichment, where they gained new experiences and took the opportunity for in-depth reflexion about their social needs and future perspectives. In other words, they appreciated our interest in their actual life and were happy to share their opinions and experiences with the other participants.