

# What facilitates older people's learning on 50plus platforms and which kind of Web2.0 tools support them best?

## Executive Summary



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## Project background

The vision of the EU-project 'PEER-Dare to be wise!' is to provide facilitation of peer learning supported by customized Web2.0 tools for adults aged 50plus.

To achieve this, the project examines ways of facilitating the exchange of knowledge and information on 50plus social network platforms by identifying, testing and adapting a set of open source Web2.0 tools<sup>1</sup>. Beyond the project's life-cycle, it is anticipated that the research and work carried out will be of particular interest to operators of 50plus social network platforms.

Although older adults are one of the fastest growing user groups of the Internet, the use of Web2.0 tools is still rare among them. Research covering the adaption and use of Web2.0 tools, and in particular, of 50plus platforms by older people, has been carried out, however little is known about what motivates older people to engage in peer learning through these platforms. There is also limited data on the tools older people would prefer to use for learning purposes.

This report presents the summarised findings of a key deliverable, D3 '*Motivational factors for older people's learning on senior citizens' platforms: a didactical concept*'. Desk research was conducted looking at the **motivational** elements of learning in later life, particularly around ICT and social network platforms. An outline of findings from two participatory workshops is then provided, with a particular focus on the **exchange of knowledge** between older learners.

Finally, the report analyses the results of a **survey** among **operators** of 50plus social network platforms to identify the tools used currently and the tools that may be of potential benefit in the future.

## Learning and online learning in later life

Learning in later life often sees a paradigm shift away from academic attainment or qualifications to a more social learning experience that brings a degree of pleasure and fulfilment to the individuals. It is not only about learning per se but about an understanding which extends an individual's opportunity to remain active, physically, socially and mentally. Hence, learning in later life should be designed to meet aspects such as self-actualization, building relationships and creating social networks.

Technology can help realise these aims. Web2.0 tools can facilitate a wide range of learning experiences enabling users to benefit from new functionalities and provide opportunities to give and receive feedback and comments, and to create, upload, share, modify and to tag content.<sup>2</sup>

The key elements of learning in Web2.0 settings involve<sup>3</sup> placing the learner at the centre of the learning process; a shift from traditional teaching to learning. Creating a collaborative knowledge environment where learners are co-producers in the learning process

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on PEER access the website: <http://www.peer-learning-50plus.eu/>

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<sup>2</sup> MFKK Invention and Research Center Services Co. Ltd (ed.) (2011): Web2.0 Best Practice for Senior Citizens. Deliverable of the W@ve 2.0 project.

<sup>3</sup> Coello, E.: ICT supporting Lifelong Learning. The European perspective. 26. June 2008,

is a particular advantage of Web2.0 tools.

Despite the digital divide between generations, older people are increasingly enthusiastic about online learning. The benefits<sup>4</sup> empower individuals to gain and/or pass on knowledge to others, maintaining cognitive ability as well as developing interests in a range of subject areas. Furthermore, it provides choice for the learner, allowing them to learn at a time and place that suits their needs.

## Reasons for joining social network platforms

Online social network platforms have the potential to facilitate social interaction, form support networks and provide the opportunity to build networks and to exchange information and knowledge with others. Information exchange is arguably the primary reason, particularly knowledge exchange within a community of likeminded people<sup>5</sup>, followed by the forming of friendships for social support and recreational purposes. A further explanation can be taken from the way in which people join social network platforms<sup>6</sup>, as they are mostly seen as a means to obtain the necessary information and knowledge to solve daily problems<sup>7</sup>. Members are not

simply interested in questions and answers, rather a dialogue, debate and discussion around their topics of interest.

The perceived attraction of online communities among older people suggests that a range of factors<sup>8</sup> exist, in particular: seeking information from the communities' website; looking for, and providing, advice, guidance and opinion; engaging in meaningful discussion, although a challenge can be a lack of discussion which may lead to dis-engagement with the online community; binding new relationships with others; meeting a diverse group of people from different backgrounds, something which is even more important for older adults than other age groups; and finally, similarity and sense of community.

## Motivational factors for online exchange – workshops' results

Two participatory workshops were conducted in Ulm, Germany and Glasgow, UK to identify and better understand the preferred way of transferring knowledge and information, and explore ways whereby further stimulation through use of Web2.0 tools can be achieved.

In total, 21 older learners participated in the two workshops with the key findings pointing towards experiential learning and knowledge sharing with others of

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4 Cf. AK Media des ZAWiW / Schanz. Auswertung: Teilnehmerbefragung der Herbstakademie 2011 zu virtuellen Lernprojekten. 2011

5 Wasko, M and Faraj, S. (2000). It is what one does: Why people participate and help others in electronic communities of practices. *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, 9 (2-3), 155-173.

6 Ridings, C. and Gefen, D (2004). Virtual Virtual Community Attraction: Why People Hang Out Online. *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*. 10 (1) Article 4. [http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue1/ridings\\_gefen.html](http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue1/ridings_gefen.html)

7 Correia, A.M.R.; Mesquita, A.; Paulos, A. (2010). *Virtual Communities of Practice: Investigating Motivations*

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and Constraints in the Processes of Knowledge Creation and Transfer.

*Electronic Journal of Knowledge*

*Management*, 8(1), (Special ECKM issue). [URL:

<http://www.ejkm.com/volume-8/v8-1/v8-i1-art2.htm> ]

8 Mittilä, T. and Antikainen, M. (2006) Perceived Attraction of Online

Communities among Elderly People. In: *Conference proceedings of ICEB and eBRF 2006*.

similar interest and receiving feedback from other learners on views and opinions. 'Posting' was viewed as being an interesting dimension to the learning process, in particular receiving information on posts, the usefulness of posted information for others and who else reads the information posted. Moreover, the ability to get a structured overview of information shared would also be helpful for learners.

A further aspect which held importance among the older learners was the flow of communication, and in particular, the desire for polite, respectful and constructive communication among users. With reference to the way of communication on some mainstream social network platforms such as Facebook, older users retreat from what they see as '*meaningless content*', such as what someone is having for dinner. Instead, they are keen to engage in conversations which are challenging and meaningful.

When exchanging knowledge, learners want to know who the other users are – this means they want to get insight into the profile of other platform members. They prefer to exchange knowledge with people who are active 'exchangers' and not only passive 'consumers' of others contributions.

When discussing and working on a topic collectively, learners suggested that joint problem solving should be done in a creative way, with guidance by a moderator or 'champion' being crucial to successfully achieving a positive learning experience. They also felt that when others share information and experiences on a 50plus platform, the reliability of the search function was an important element and the data that can be gathered from the search function, for example, the top poster, the number of posts uploaded.

## Contextual influences on older people's use of Web2.0 for knowledge exchanges

Research<sup>9</sup> and the two participatory workshops reaffirm that the key motivational factors for older learners using Web2.0 tools include perceived privacy, trust and security. It is an entirely alien concept to many older learners that information can be shared so freely via the internet. They may have heard stories about invasions of privacy, and this for a generation who grew up with different values relating to sharing information, is a significant barrier to overcome. Trust is therefore crucial in motivating older learners to share information, particularly personal data. Reassurance has to be given by operators that personal data is secure and that the option for anonymity exists should they wish. Good practice is to assure that the user is the owner of shared data.

Additional factors that influence participation among older learners include the simplicity of the tools. More complex tools can often be too much for individuals to cope with and this leads to disengagement. Clear, simple Web2.0 tools that are easy to understand, and free from adverts is particularly attractive to the older learner. User interfaces should be well-arranged, easily understandable, customizable, adaptive and have an attractive design.

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<sup>9</sup> For example:

Lewis, S and Ariyachandra, Th. (2010). Seniors and Online Social Network Use. 2010 CONISAR Proceedings.

Schwarz-Woelzl, M. and Holoher-Ertl, Th. (2011). D2.3 Synthesis Report on target group analysis and user needs and requirements. D2.3 of the Go-myLife project.

The main usability criteria which Web2.0 tools should provide to serve peer learning on 50plus networks include:

- No registration for the Web2.0 tool (e.g. Doodle)
- Provision of simple instructions and guidelines on how to use the tools, preferably explained by video clips.
- Communication related Web2.0 tools should have:
  - options to select received information and messages easily, and related to personal interests;
  - functionalities which keep track of the interaction structure;

To serve peer learning on 50plus platforms the ideal environment should provide functions such as:

- Different tagging functionalities, e.g. tagging according to personal importance.
- Easy to handle and reliable search function within the 50plus platform.
- The creation of a personal profile on the platform should provide criteria which support face-to-face meetings (e.g. 'who lives close by?', 'how can I find out more about a particular person?')
- On the registration site, operators should state that personal data will be forwarded only after explicit permission has been given by the user.
- A code of conduct for the members of the platform should be provided.
- Advertisements are limited and only related to the interests of older people.

## 50plus platform operators survey

During spring 2012, a survey was conducted with 70 operators of 50plus platforms across 20 different countries to ascertain their views on a) what tools are currently used and how popular they are among their platform members; and b) what additional tools might be useful from their perspective. Six respondents provided feedback with the key points raised being:

- Majority of operators provide personalization features and have their platform integrated with external tools.
- Half of the respondents apply self-designed applications and use open source licenses.
- No one uses application programming interface.
- Internal mailing systems, forums and chat rooms are installed on the majority of platforms.
- Blogs, groups of interest /newsgroups, chats, forums, personal galleries and polls are perceived as highly popular among the platform users by the respondents. Internal mailing systems are neither popular nor unpopular.
- The main tools which are considered as useful to have in future include *Communication tools*, such as 'better' forum tools, date programming, blogs, and group communication by screen; *material repository tools* for exchange, sharing and uploading on the platform; and others tools such as games, and connection to TV formats.

## Summary and Conclusions

Web2.0 tools have the potential to support both self-directed learning and collaborative learning, and exert a significant impact on informal and non-formal learning.

Our findings indicate that older people appreciate Web2.0 tools for knowledge exchange with peers under the pre-condition that tools are customized to their needs and requirements, trustful, secure and safe. They are willing to take risks and learn new things via Web2.0 tools. Moreover, Web2.0 tools should support the ability of individuals to express themselves, pass on experience and be able to be dignified, valuable and recognized.

In addition, older learners are keen to meet likeminded people out with their immediate social networks (e.g. to share knowledge about jazz). They value knowledge exchange in group settings, an environment which appears to be perceived as more interactive and more supportive with regards to creativity as opposed to self-directed learning. However, moderation in group learning settings is perceived as crucial for the success of exchanges while self-organised groups are less valued.

In general, older learners are motivated to share knowledge and experiences with their peers if it is a reciprocal process and in line with their interests, goals, values and beliefs. They are motivated further, if the communication patterns are polite, respectful and the content is meaningful and challenging. They welcome feedback on how helpful a particular piece of advice has been for others and who and how many have read it. Therefore it is important that Web2.0 tools are supportive in providing a structured overview of information traffic.

Finally, older learners are motivated to work collectively on 'important' topics if it takes place in a creative environment where and problem solving can be achieved jointly with others. Web2.0 tools should support this goal by providing an easy and structured overview of who individuals have worked with and when the interaction took place.

In conclusion, the following types of Web2.0 tools are suggested to serve older learner's online peer learning:

- A repository of tools to store different file formats and media types
- File sharing tools to upload and download shared content
- Commenting tools for exchanging and discussing knowledge, experience and opinions
- Audio- and video conferencing tools for augmented realities in group learning processes
- Planning tools for appointments and other events
- Bookmarking tools to organise relevant information
- Collaborative tools to work jointly on a particular topic.

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