DIGITALIATORS - Digital upskilling for senior citizens, focused on their everyday necessary online transactions, especially after the pandemic

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DESK RESEARCH - BULGARIA

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Table of Contents

Contents

Introduction 3

The level of ICT 3

References 5

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Introduction

In spite of the advantages, Bulgaria continues to fall behind the majority of European Union countries in terms of e-government service utilization. Merely 36% of internet users in Bulgaria avail themselves of e-government services, whereas the EU average stands at 64%.

The level of ICT

The level of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) use among the elderly in Bulgaria has witnessed significant progress in recent years. With the increasing availability and accessibility of technology, more and more older adults in Bulgaria are embracing the digital world and benefiting from its various opportunities. Bulgaria's elderly population is gradually recognizing the advantages of ICT in terms of communication, education, and accessing essential services. Many seniors now own smartphones, tablets, or computers, enabling them to stay connected with their loved ones through social media platforms, video calls, and messaging apps. These digital tools have bridged the geographical gaps, allowing elderly Bulgarians to maintain relationships with family and friends both near and far.

The internet has also become a valuable resource for lifelong learning and personal development among the elderly. Online courses, educational platforms, and digital libraries offer a wealth of information and enable older adults to pursue their interests, learn new skills, and stay mentally active. The ease of access to digital information has empowered the elderly to expand their horizons and engage in lifelong learning.

Furthermore, ICT has simplified the process of accessing various services for the elderly in Bulgaria. Online banking and e-commerce platforms have made it more convenient for seniors to manage their finances, shop for groceries and other necessities, and have items delivered to their doorstep. Additionally, telemedicine services have gained popularity, allowing elderly individuals to consult with healthcare professionals remotely, saving them the hassle of traveling long distances for routine check-ups.

However, it is important to acknowledge that while the level of ICT use among the elderly in Bulgaria is improving, there are still some barriers to digital inclusion that need to be addressed. Factors such as limited digital literacy, lack of access to affordable internet connections, and concerns about online security and privacy can hinder older adults from fully embracing ICT.

To overcome these challenges, efforts are being made to enhance digital literacy programs tailored specifically for seniors. These programs provide training and support to help older adults develop the necessary skills to navigate digital devices, use the internet effectively, and safeguard their

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online presence. Additionally, initiatives are underway to expand internet infrastructure and improve affordability, ensuring that all elderly Bulgarians have equal opportunities to participate in the digital age.

In conclusion, the level of ICT use among the elderly in Bulgaria has shown promising growth, enabling them to connect with others, access information, and utilize various online services. As efforts continue to promote digital inclusion and address existing barriers, it is expected that more elderly individuals in Bulgaria will embrace ICT and reap its numerous benefits, ultimately leading to enhanced quality of life for this demographic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed highlighted some challenges faced by older people in Bulgaria regarding the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). *Digital Divide:* The pandemic exposed the existing digital divide between different age groups. Many older individuals in Bulgaria lacked access to necessary digital devices like smartphones, tablets, or computers. This limited their ability to engage in online activities and stay connected during lockdowns and social distancing measures. *Limited Digital Skills*: Older people often faced difficulties in acquiring the necessary digital skills to navigate online platforms effectively. This lack of familiarity with technology hindered their ability to access vital information, telehealth services, online shopping, and virtual social interactions. *Language Barriers:* In Bulgaria, some older individuals might face language barriers when it comes to using ICT. If they are not proficient in the Bulgarian language or unfamiliar with Cyrillic script, it can be challenging for them to navigate online platforms and access relevant information. *Online Security and Scams:* Older people may be more vulnerable to online scams and fraudulent activities. Lack of awareness about cybersecurity and online threats can put them at risk of falling victim to phishing attempts, identity theft, or financial scams. Efforts have been made to address these challenges. NGOs, government initiatives, and community organizations in Bulgaria have provided digital literacy training programs, distributed devices, and offered support services tailored to the needs of older individuals. However, it remains an ongoing process to ensure inclusive and equitable digital access and support for all age groups in the country.

In Bulgaria, several programs and initiatives are available to assist older people in using eServices and developing ICT skills. These programs aim to bridge the digital divide, promote digital literacy, and empower older adults to navigate the digital world effectively. Here are a few examples:

- Digital Literacy Training Programs: Various organizations and institutions offer digital literacy courses specifically designed for older adults. These programs provide training on basic computer skills, internet navigation, online communication, and using eServices. Examples include courses offered by the Bulgarian Red Cross, senior centers, libraries, and community centers.

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- "Active Generations" Program: The "Active Generations" program, implemented by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, focuses on enhancing digital skills among older adults. It offers training courses on ICT use, internet safety, eServices, and e-government platforms. The program also provides technical assistance and support in accessing online services.
- "Digital Bulgaria" Initiative: The "Digital Bulgaria" initiative aims to improve digital literacy among all citizens, including older adults. It offers training sessions, workshops, and online resources to enhance ICT skills and promote digital inclusion. The initiative collaborates with local municipalities, NGOs, and educational institutions to reach diverse communities.
- Telecenters for Social Services: Telecenters for Social Services are established by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy to provide assistance to vulnerable groups, including older people. These centers offer guidance on accessing eServices, navigating government websites, and using digital tools to receive social support, benefits, and healthcare services.

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