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

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DESK RESEARCH - ROMANIA

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In the EU, Romania ranks last in terms of the degree of digitisation of its economy and society, and second in the global ranking, according to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). In Romania, there are also big differences in digital skills between people living in urban and rural areas, to the disadvantage of the latter. Thus, 16.4% of people living in rural areas have never used the internet, compared to 7% of people living in urban areas, and of those who use the internet only 77% access the internet daily or almost daily in rural areas, compared to 86% in urban areas.

In post-Pandemic Covid-19 Romania, people aged 55-74 are less digitally integrated and have fewer digital or computer skills than other age groups (according to the National Study on Digital Inclusion and Exclusion in Romania 2022). More than 62% of these people use the internet on a daily or almost daily basis, but less than a quarter use other internet devices than mobile phones. Most use the internet to make audio or video calls and for social networking. There is also a much lower preference for instant messaging or using email for communication, with the majority of Romanian seniors using the internet to read online news and search for health information.

Despite this, three quarters of internet users aged 55+ say they have not seen information or content on internet news sites or social media that they considered false or dubious, and more than half have not taken steps to manage access to personal data on the internet. Use of the internet for other purposes is much lower.

Internet shopping is little used by seniors (only 33.5% have shopped online, and 67.7% do not even search online for information about goods and services). At the same time, only 5% of Romanian seniors use online banking.

Romania continues to face a lack of basic digital skills, enabling the use of advanced technologies by both citizens and public employees. Romania ranks last in the EU in terms of digital public services, being the only country with a score below 50%, compared to the EU average of over 70% and almost 90% in Estonia.

Technology, in the current period, is at the basis of many social processes for seniors and not only, such as: the ease of ordering medicines on the internet, the much easier discussions of seniors with

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relatives/friends/acquaintances via video camera, phone or computer, tablet and, why not, finding current information on many topics (health, politics, tourism etc.) via online newspapers and magazines on the internet that can be found and accessed very easily. In the case of older people, the use of the Internet and mobile phones is a useful way of finding out news on health-related topics, information on current pension issues, changes that may occur and other topics of public interest, as well as the opportunity to talk to relatives, representatives of public institutions (Health Insurance House, National Public Pension House, family doctor etc.), children, friends, people who are abroad, via the webcam on their phone or computer/tablet.

Digital technologies adapted to education for older people are a necessity in today's society, and in order to realise the point that older people can learn the importance of using digitalisation, it is essential to take the time and effort to explore the best ways to use them for education. However, let's not forget that the latter necessarily involves friendships and that the best educators are able to create, maintain and use such bonds to support older people in their learning.

In Romania, a constructive initiative in terms of technology learning would be the programme for the development of digital skills among seniors in Cluj-Napoca, called "Seniorii Digitali" (Digital Seniors). The Transilvania IT team started the digitalisation courses for seniors within the project in July 2019. The project aimed to provide free courses to Cluj seniors on how to use digital technologies.

"We want our trainees to gain enough knowledge in computer operation and internet use to be able to pay bills, pay their taxes through the platforms, make requests to the City Hall without having to stand in queues", said Bianca Muntean, the Group Manager.

More than 150 elderly people took part in these courses, organised in 4 series of 3 groups. In the learning process, they received support not only from the trainers, but also from the volunteers who joined the project. Most of the volunteers were students from Cluj, who were eager to share their knowledge of the internet.

The project took place from July to December 2019 and was coordinated by Transilvania IT Cluster, under the aegis of the Advisory Council for Entrepreneurship and Innovation in IT, with the support of the Cluj-Napoca City Hall and City Council in partnership with AROBS Transilvania Software and Simplon Romania, as well as with the support of the Social Welfare Directorates. The courses took place at the Senior Citizens Centres no. 1 and no. 2 in Cluj-Napoca.

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Another digital literacy programme dedicated to seniors is organised by the Centre for Seniors of the Municipality of Bucharest CSMB and ECDL Romania, which will carry out joint activities to support seniors in Bucharest by implementing pilot digital education programmes within the Digital Citizen programme.

So we see that at country level, there are isolated initiatives to promote digital literacy for seniors, but they seem to be insufficient for the scale of the needs identified. What is important is that awareness is growing and, albeit with small steps, progress is being made in Romania. There are many reasons why one may experience the "digital divide" and these need to be understood and integrated into a strategy. Technology is advancing faster than the ability of some older people to acquire the skills to work digitally at a professional level. So this creates the digital divide, i.e. the demand for digital skills has outstripped the supply. Addressing these problems and gaps is all the more important as the use of the internet denotes an important factor in the lives of older people, even a biological one, with some studies even highlighting it as a beneficial prospect in the current period.

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