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

Project no. № 2022-1-BG01-KA220-ADU-000085900

GENERAL REPORT ABOUT PARTNERS FOCUS GROUPS

Co-funded by the European Union

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Aims of the focus groups

- to receive first-hand feedback on the actual necessary online transactions and needs of seniors in each country, in order to create the base for the training material
- to engage relevant stakeholders from the very beginning of the project
- to integrate and complete data collected through the desk analysis
- to define the needs of senior citizens in all participating countries and detect the level of competence of the main target group

The focus groups open discussion on findings of the research and mapping activity implemented in each country and will have as conclusion the selection of the topics for the learning material.

Target involved

Each partner organized two national focus groups (one with seniors and one with representatives of adult learning institutions and organisations dealing with seniors), involving at least between 5 and 7 participants per country. In total, in the focus groups, 30-42 seniors with no previous digital skills and 30-42 representatives of adult learning organisations, IT educators and institutions dealing with senior citizens was involved.

The results and answers were organized in short reports with the conclusions of these focus groups (2 reports in each country, 12 in total) compiled in English.

Target groups of the DIGITALIATORS project are both individual persons and institutions:

- Senior adults, who feel terrified by the idea of using digital applications themselves, yet they feel pressed by the fact they need to make more and more transactions digitally. If they do not choose to overcome their reluctance they will feel incompetant or they will be excluded.

- IT Educators. Although the learning material that we will develop may be used directly by seniors having taken into consideration the specificities of their age, it can very well be used as a supplement or the digital part of blended learning. In this case, the role of IT Educators will be to smoothen their first contact with digital technology, guide them through the material, clarify their questions and help them feel more confident. DIGITALIATORS project will develop a guide for IT Educators, helping them to understand the specific educational and learning needs of seniors as well as how to use the learning material.

- Organisations and entities providing IT education that already use learning material and methods, mainly developed to address younger persons. Seniors constitute a huge, mostly unexplored potential of customers. Even in the case they have introductory courses to digitalisation for seniors these as a rule do not cover their needs to learn how to cope with everyday tasks and what to pay attention to.

- Third age Universities to organise blended learning.

Questions for seniors

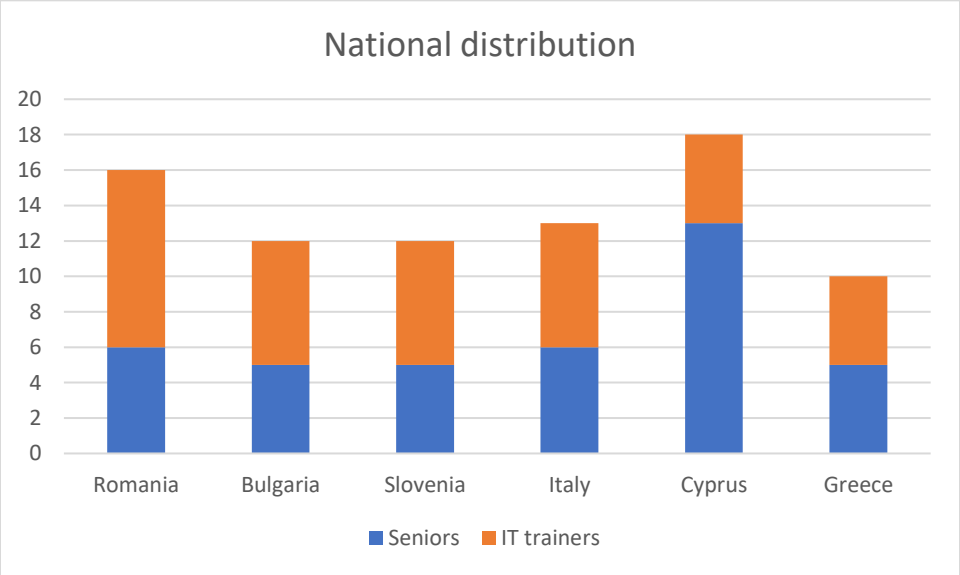
1. Based on your direct experience, what is your point of view about the phenomenon of digitalisation?
2. What applications or digital tools do you use and for what reasons?
3. What applications and digital tools would you like to use and why do you think they would be useful?
4. What exactly do you think you would need to be able to use more digital tools? What stops you from using online tools and applications?
5. How should a training for seniors who want to learn how to use digital tools be and what should it include?
6. In your view, what would attract you to learn in a practical training about digital tools and what should be categorically avoided?

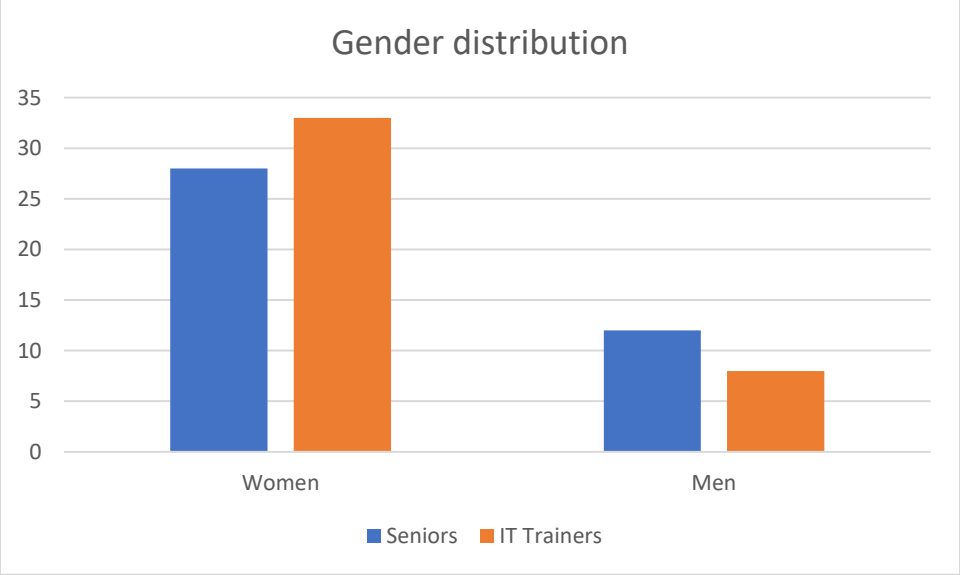
Questions for IT educators

1. Based on your direct experience, what is your point of view about the phenomenon of digitalisation?
2. What applications or digital tools do the seniors you interact with during the trainings mainly use?
3. What attitudes, skills and knowledge should the IT educators possess to be efficient for seniors?
4. What is the potential added value that the good understanding and using of the application and digital tools can bring?
5. What are the possible lines of intervention for improving the digitalisation access in future perspective (in terms of responsibility the different institutional actors: training institutions, companies, public administration etc.)?
6. In your view, what might be some topics to be addressed and on which to focus attention in the training path of IT trainers for seniors in the context of digital world?

Results

The results of the focus groups allow partners to know on the one hand, which specific contents the learning material they will develop and cover and on the other which are the attitude factors they have to face and therefore what type of learning methods to select. Second, addressing the second target group, IT educators or trainers, partner organisations will develop ways of assisting them to get to know specificities of how seniors learn, what they have to have in mind when they train them in order that they transmit their knowledge/skills effectively and that they are as prepared as possible to assist seniors being introduced in the digital world.


National distribution
20
18
16
14
12
10
8
6
4
2
0
Romania
Bulgaria
Slovenia
Italy
Cyprus
Greece
Seniors
IT trainers


Gender distribution
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Women
Men
Seniors
IT Trainers

ROMANIA

Digitalisation is a challenge for Romanian seniors, some of whom have no interest at all in using digital tools, others use only as much as necessary under the supervision of family members, and others have sufficient knowledge to be able to use a variety of digital tools and applications. In the view of seniors, a digital literacy course should be simple, should be safe for all older people to use, should include both theoretical and practical concepts, should contain attractive, applied information that can be tested directly on participants' phones, but also on laptops, in face-to-face meetings, and should provide the opportunity for socialising.

According to trainers from Romania, seniors need to discovery learning, gradual familiarisation with the concepts (from simple to medium), ongoing support, but also encouragement and reassurance that things are reversible and can be fixed no matter what they do in that digital tool. They certainly need course support in physical format, with real pictures of what they need to do practically, in a relaxed and safe space where they feel listened to and valued.

BULGARIA

Seniors from Bulgaria agreed that having an e-mail is a must like having your postal address. One of them shared that she has an e-mail address but doesn`t know it and with her e-mail operates her daughter. Similar is the situation with their friends and relatives in Bulgaria. When it comes to using the e-mail for tax and governmental services, all of them said they don`t know how to do it and don`t know anyone in their circle who can use these types of services.

The discussion with IT trainers shed light onto the challenges seniors face in adapting to the digital environment and the need for tailored training approaches. Based on their previous experience, the educators emphasized on the importance of digital trainers to practice patience and build mutual trust with seniors for the process to be effective, as well as to use simple language and provide practical sessions. They also stressed on the fact the lack of basic digital skills leads to exclusion and presents challenges to socialization in the current digital era. Not less importantly, without digital skills, it seems that elders have become increasingly dependent for their daily operations. A main tool to overcome the above-mentioned division and the increasing digital gap is to provide a relevant and accessible training to seniors.

SLOVENIA

Focus group participants feel that there are no barriers to using more digital tools, but that they already use all the applications they need and find necessary. They are aware that applications change and update very quickly and that seniors need to be able to keep up with these changes. Seniors are also often hindered by security concerns, so they need to be introduced to digitalisation from the ground up. what they need to be aware of when using computers, the internet and smartphones, what data they should not enter etc.

Through talking to educators, we found that most of them are in favour of digitisation, but that the attitude of the teacher towards the process is important from the beginning, and that the teacher then passes this on to the seniors. They are aware that digitisation is part of our everyday life, that it can be very useful and make our daily work easier, but in some cases it can also harm us if we are not sufficiently informed about certain issues.

CYPRUS

All seniors participants agreed on the fact that digitalisation has been really present in our lives, yet, some did not agree as much with it. They have expressed their frustration especially during and after COVID-19, as many services have become online and they emphasized on the help provided by their family (children and grandchildren) for specific tasks that needed to be carried out online. The applications or digital tools that are used by seniors were mainly in order to communicate with family and friends. All of them had phones (some even smartphones). Participants were open to learn using almost anything that would facilitate their lives.

All IT trainers participants agreed on the fact that digitalisation is inevitable in our lives. Technology is everywhere, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and its evolution keeps increasing. In addition, it was characterised as necessary for people of any age, no matter their profile, emphasising on seniors. During this discussion, participants agreed on the fact that IT trainers should be trained on the mental health of seniors, not only on the digital tools that they will need to teach them since this target group is vulnerable and rather particular.

ITALY

According to the majority of the seniors surveyed, the use of technological and Internet-related devices is now becoming predominant in every aspect of one's life. There is a need to know how to use these devices not only 'at home' but also physically, going to the post office, hospitals, public offices and even shops. In fact, in order to be able to book one's visits to the doctor or to a health facility, one needs to be able to register on a platform or use a totem to queue up. The same applies to public offices, almost all bookings are made electronically and those who are not able to access these methods often find themselves in need, needing the help of a younger person to teach them or to do the operations for them.

With regard to their skills and those of the educational world, the IT trainers were partially satisfied and look forward to the future with confidence. Their skills have developed, they are able to use more devices and software; the level of digitisation of school facilities is also rising, although the threshold is still very low, compared to other countries in Europe. The skill level of the elderly, who attend the courses held by our experts, was also raised. For some, this was an entirely new discovery, as both the use of PCs and other devices was almost non-existent before the pandemic, as classes were all held physically and there was never any need to use electronic devices, except for those learners who attended IT-related courses. According to educators, however, there is still a large number of older people who are reticent about using technology, partly out of fear and partly out of disinterest.

GREECE

In Greece, it seems people around 70 years old do not use at all social media. The participants have extremely limited skills and would like to be able to learn more concerning digitalization with an emphasis on the importance of patience in teaching. They mentioned that digitalisation made their lives more difficult and complicated as they feel isolated and out of touch with the generation. Digitalization happened so fast that seniors did not have (me to adjust to these news skills needed today. They want to be able to send emails, pictures, and access government and banking services. Overall, basic digital skills will help them make their life easier and more connected.

The focus group discussion with IT trainers highlighted the challenges seniors face in adapting to digital technologies and the need for tailored training approaches. The report recommends interventions such as free lessons, simplified services, and combined print and telephone support to improve digitalisation access. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of IT educators possessing patience, empathy, and the ability to explain concepts in simple terms. By addressing these recommendations and focusing on key training topics, it is possible to enhance digital literacy among seniors and reduce the digital divide in Greece.

CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing the main answers and information provided by the stakeholders in the focus groups, we can summarize the needs of seniors in terms of digital literacy in a few essential points that must be taken into account in the materials developed within the project.

First of all, everything must start from understanding the real challenges that seniors have in the fight with technology. Whether we are talking about barriers, fears or more or less justified fears, all must be taken into account in building the course content of the project.

Secondly, before any learning content, the focus must be on understanding the advantages and benefits that digitization brings concretely to the lives of seniors.

Thirdly, we must consider a holistic vision of the trainer's role in this complex process of teaching digitalization to seniors. Qualities such as patience, adaptability and flexibility must be cultivated in trainers, who can then transmit adapted content, permanent support, real empathy and constructive feedback to seniors.

Then it is essential that learning begins gradually, to start from clear and sufficiently well explained things, to clear up any confusion, with the help of a personalized approach, in a guided practical process.

Even if digital interaction exists in certain areas and segments, the clarification, expansion and diversification of actions and tools that can bring real benefits to seniors, from beginner to intermediate level at least, must be taken into account.

Online safety and security are other elements that must be addressed in the project materials, with an increased emphasis on prevention and concrete situations that may arise, with the aim of providing confidence and security to seniors.

As the project itself proposes, it was found that an approach centered on the needs of each country is required and, thus, national aspects related to local and national administrative services, taxes and fees, bank payments, control and security must be taken into account, online shopping etc.

Modern techniques, such as gamification, will be used to captivate the public and transmit information in an attractive way, which also ensures interactivity.

Ensuring and improving soft skills for trainers must be another essential concern within the project materials, attention being directed to skills such as effective communication, mindsets for success, motivation and personal development, relaxation techniques, recognition and celebration of success etc.

Last but not least, the materials that will be developed must also include the promotion of digital independence by building confidence that any aspect can be solved, laying a foundation that can also ensure self-learning and empowering seniors to dare and be able to use on your own as many digital tools as possible.