

Exploring the potential of digital technology in later life



A **PROVOCATION PAPER** written for Nominet Trust by David Wilcox, Drew Mackie, Steve Dale, John Popham

August 2013

Foreword

Building on existing research, consultation and exploring new approaches is at the heart of Nominet Trust investment programmes. This report is a great example of that process as it brings together a lot that is known about the role digital technology can play in later life, but it also opens up new ways of thinking about the use of digital technology across the lifecourse. By mixing provocations showing ways forward with themes that are well understood, I hope this document is useful to anyone developing practical activities that use digital technologies to support people of all ages, and particularly those in later life.

As always we're keen to hear your responses to this paper and look forward to working with you to build on the ideas presented in this report.

Dan Sutch

Head of Development Research
Nominet Trust – August 2013

About the authors

Written by **David Wilcox**,
Drew Mackie, **Steve Dale**,
John Popham for Nominet Trust

David Wilcox

David is developing the practice of social reporting, based on past experience as a journalist and consultant on regeneration partnerships, community engagement, and social media. He has written books on participation and partnerships and co-authored *Social By Social: Social technology for social impact*.

You can find out more about David and can contact him via http://socialreporter.com/?page_id=41.

Email david@socialreporter.com

Twitter [@davidwilcox](https://twitter.com/davidwilcox)

In practice social reporting involves explorations that use a mix of collaborative online activity and workshops to clarify issues, develop ideas for action, and help build networks. You can find out more about those here, www.socialreporters.net/?page_id=552. David worked with Nominet Trust on an earlier exploration: *The Digital Edge - using digital technology to support young people*.

Drew Mackie

Drew has spent the last 30 years working with communities throughout the UK to create and help deliver projects ranging from Swimming Pools to whole urban areas. He is particularly interested in:

- The use of games and simulations to map out possible futures (he is an ex Chairman of the International Simulation and Gaming Association)
- Group storytelling to explore perceptions and attitudes
- Social Network Analysis to examine the structure and capabilities of public body delivery

He and David Wilcox have worked together for many years and have recently devised games and facilitated events around the use of social media by communities and agencies. Most of Drew's recent work is concerned with the mapping and analysis of complex networks of individuals, enterprises and agencies.

Email drewmackie@mac.com

Twitter [@admaque](https://twitter.com/admaque)

Steve Dale

Steve is a passionate community and collaboration ecologist with experience in creating off-line and on-line environments that foster conversations and engagement. His career to date places him at the confluence between knowledge management, people & behaviours and collaborative technologies; getting the blend right is the secret to unlocking the genius in people!

He is both an evangelist and practitioner in the use of collaborative technologies and Social Media applications to support personal learning and development, and delivers occasional training and master-classes on the use of social technologies and networks for improving digital literacies. Steve's consultancy work focuses on helping clients improve knowledge sharing and collaboration, and the deployment of learning networks to promote personal and professional development.

Email steve.dale@gmail.com

Twitter [@stephendale](https://twitter.com/stephendale)

John Popham

John Popham is a freelance facilitator of using social media and new technologies for social good. His career has encompassed work in local government, the voluntary sector, further education and as a private consultant. He was the originator of #twicket, the world's first live broadcast of a village cricket match, and has managed projects funded by Nominet Trust including Celebration 2.0 and Our Digital Planet. He is a trainer and supporter in effective use of social media for communications, digital inclusion, rural broadband development, and live video streaming. He runs Social Media Surgeries around the north of England and is a frequent speaker and broadcaster on issues around new technologies and social media.

Email john.popham@johnpopham.com

Twitter [@johnpopham](https://twitter.com/johnpopham)

Technology in Later Life: The good, the bad, the frustrating and the exhilarating

Notes

The forum on Gransnet, set up and summarised by Geraldine Bedell for our exploration, brought alive the day-to-day experience of older people using technology: the good, the bad, the frustrating and the exhilarating. These experiences and the issues they raise have been reviewed in light of wider consultation and future research, and are distilled here into 10 provocations that can act as talking points and possibly as a focus for project development and investment. The reference material for each of these is provided for further information and deeper exploration.

But provoking new ideas isn't sufficient if we are to develop better ways to support the use of digital technology in later life. There is so much excellent work to build on that in addition to these provocations we have developed some themes that are important to consider in responding to these challenges. It's only a start though. Indeed there are many other themes that could be developed - because we found the exploration to be more about technology and life, than technology for older people.

<http://dtlater.wikispaces.com/Introduction>

Themes

Notes

These themes aim to draw out some common issues across our 10 provocations.

OVERALL THEME: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY WILL BE SIGNIFICANT FOR EVERYONE LATER IN LIFE - AND A LOT OF OLDER PEOPLE MAY BE EXCLUDED FROM THE BENEFITS.

Most people’s lives are already heavily dependent on technology through the appliances we use, the ways we communicate and engage with banks, shops and public services. That is likely to increase, and the challenge in later life is to make the best use of technology that we can as our circumstances, interests and abilities change.

Just how technology helps will be different for everyone, because its use is personal. Seeing someone as ‘older’ isn’t a good enough perspective through which to understand what will be appropriate. The mix of life experience and ageing is complex

Digital technology can certainly bring particular benefits later in life. It can help combat loneliness and social isolation, and provide new opportunities for people to connect, learn, develop new activities, and find a new role in life.

In addition, having access to online systems, either personally or through someone who will act as a helper or ‘proxy user’, will be

essential as public services become digital by default.

Because of these potential benefits, and policy imperatives, a great deal has been done to encourage and support use of technology under digital inclusion programmes. However, achieving the benefits, and widespread take-up, has not been easy.

- In May 2012 the Communications Consumer Panel, a statutory body advising Government, reported that 22% of the UK adult population - eleven million people - still do not use the internet at home. In the Panel’s view the challenge to increase participation is underestimated; meeting the challenge is underfunded; and people who remain unable to access online services will suffer increasing detriment if the challenge isn't met.
- The panel reported that older and disabled people, and those in low-income households, are much less likely to use the internet at home. In common with many other industrialised countries, the UK is experiencing a slow-down, almost a plateau, in internet take-up.

From our exploration we concluded:

- Inability or unwillingness to use digital technology may or may not be a missed opportunity for wellbeing and enjoyment. However, it will almost certainly be a problem for those not online, and government, as public services can increasingly only be accessed online, or with special assistance.
- Just how technology helps will be different for everyone,

Notes

THEME 5. CO-DESIGNING WITH A CLEAR PURPOSE WILL IMPROVE USABILITY AND RELEVANCE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY LATER IN LIFE.

Although it's clear that we shouldn't simply use age as a starting point for designing interventions, there are some specific usability requirements that become apparent at different life stages. There are already a range of projects, tools and resources that can be useful for people later in life - but the challenge is to ensure they are actually usable and relevant. Working with a range of people of different ages, interests and circumstances should enable us to achieve that in the redesign of existing hardware and software tools, or the creation of new products and projects.

We expand on these issues in Provocations 1,2 3, 5 - and suggest in 10 that those who are providing training and support will have many insights that could provide a good starting point.

<http://dtlater.wikispaces.com/Theme+5>

Provocations - in detail

Notes

1. LOOK AT PERSONAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS AS WELL AS COMMON MOTIVATIONS - ONE DIGITAL SIZE WON'T FIT ALL.

While there are general benefits at any time of life in using digital technology - whether for entertainment, shopping, learning, information - everyone has different priorities and these will be shaped by life experience and current circumstances. The best way to engage people with digital technology is to start where they are, the particular interests they have developed, and the personal challenges they face.

Developments of technology for later in life should of course focus on these common motivations, with adaptation to address some of the physical and mental challenges of older age

Connecting with friends and family, and pursuing personal interests and hobbies are common reasons for using digital technology later in life. In addition there's entertainment, savings to be made shopping online, information and discussion about issues of health and finance that may become pressing. Increasingly the internet will be essential to access public services. Developments of technology for later in life should of course focus on these common motivations, with adaptation to address some of the physical and mental challenges of older age. But in all our research and discussions one message came through strongly: digital technology has to be personally relevant, useful, and usable. This is particularly important if

people have concerns about privacy, security and a general lack of trust in the unknown.

Our initial propositions in the exploration provided some ideas for how to address these issues, for example: understand people's life stories for the skills, interests and attitudes they may have developed; help people tell their stories, and explore their interests using digital technology; use digital cameras, audio recorders, ebook readers and other devices that don't require a connection; take concerns about security and privacy seriously.

CHALLENGE - how can we help people later in life - and those who may support them - explore what might suit their individual needs?

<http://dtlater.wikispaces.com/Provocation+1>

2. BUILD ON PAST EXPERIENCE WITH FAMILIAR TECHNOLOGY AS WELL AS OFFERING NEW DEVICES - THEY MAY DO THE JOB.

New devices can be challenging, and recent developments of familiar equipment may offer an easier route for some. Smart TVs and smartphones may provide what's needed without learning to use a computer.

Notes

A number of the research reports - and our discussions - make the point that it may be easier to build on people's existing use of technology, rather than introduce new devices. For example 'smart' televisions are able to connect to the internet, and smartphones offer access previously only available through a computer. Photo sharing online may be the natural extension of a past interest in photography, or further use for a new phone.

Our initial propositions also included the suggestion that in introducing anything new, also consider what friends may be using. Video chats only work if others have the facility; some people among friends and family will favour texting, others email. People's skills in adopting new technology may be influenced by past experience - so using a computer keyboard is easier if you have learned to type. If not, a tablet may be less intimidating.

While it may be tempting to suggest offering a smartphone to, for example, an older relative, a simpler phone that just offers voice and SMS texting may be more welcome. It is relatively easy to upgrade - but more difficult to help people recover from a potentially bewildering engagement with sophisticated devices.

CHALLENGE - what scope is there for using improvements in existing, familiar technologies to meet people needs in later life as well as offering new devices?

<http://dtlater.wikispaces.com/Provocation+2>

› www.nominettrust.org.uk

3. CONSIDER THE NEW LIFE SKILLS AND ACCESS PEOPLE WILL NEED AS TECHNOLOGY CHANGES OUR WORLD - USING TECHNOLOGY IS CEASING TO BE OPTIONAL.

Public services are becoming digital by default, and new opportunities for employment require at least an email address. It will be important to make the use of digital technology as accessible and easy as possible - or encourage people to act as 'proxies' in helping make the connection with the online world. Technology is changing our world - the devices we use in our homes, the way we shop, the public services that may no longer be available over the counter. The blog posts and forum discussions that we reviewed showed that for many people technology is problematic - but that it also offers opportunities to deal with the challenges of later life.

The blog posts and forum discussions that we reviewed showed that for many people technology is problematic - but that it also offers opportunities to deal with the challenges of later life.

In summarising discussion on a Gransnet forum, editor Geraldine Bedell wrote that she found a mix of attitudes.

"A fear of 'being left behind by technology'. A very strong sense that tech can't substitute for relationships although it is in politicians' interests to believe it can. A fear of 'life becoming dependent on pressing buttons'. A sense of tech as being alienating. On the other hand, a sense of possibilities and hope of being able to keep in touch with family and

Notes

more is needed. An added benefit of learning within a group, especially an established peer group, is that the support can be ongoing rather than simply front-loaded.

CHALLENGE - how could more be done to blend formal and informal approaches to make learning about digital technology a social experience, and one that might provide continuing help?

<http://dtlater.wikispaces.com/Provocation+4>

5. SEE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY FOR LATER IN LIFE AS A MAJOR MARKET - CO-DESIGNING WITH USERS COULD OFFER WIDER RELEVANCE.

On the one hand people are living and remaining active longer, and on the other hand facing a wide range of health and social challenges for longer. This will provide a growing market among older people, and an opportunity to design and test technologies for relevance and usability with any users than have diverse interests and capabilities.

We are facing a society in which 'later life' will extend considerably. Evidence to a Lords committee predicted that between 2010 and 2030 the number of people aged over 65 will increase by 51% and those over 85 will double during the same period.

› www.nominettrust.org.uk

The report **Ageing and the Use of the Internet** says:

“There is an evidence base, supported by demographic data, that suggests there is a business case for developing more specific and age-related technology-based products and services. ... Indeed, given the current and projected increase in our ageing society – not just in the UK, but globally, the private sector will have a vested interest in promoting digital literacy amongst what will be a growing consumer market.”

The report cites Kohlbacher and Hang, who write that “the silver market is an excellent field of application for new market disruptions as elderly customers will increasingly demand new products and services they had not demanded or had not been able to demand before”.

Evidence to a Lords committee predicted that between 2010 and 2030 the number of people aged over 65 will increase by 51% and those over 85 will double during the same period

Our discussions yielded a range of ideas for innovations that would benefit older people, yet have wider application. Funding challenge programmes have recently supported a number of projects and social enterprises in this field - and more innovative ideas could develop from collaborations between those with a deep understanding of the needs of older people, and those understanding the potential of digital technologies.

Notes

7. ENABLE CARERS AND CARE SERVICES – BOTH FOR DIRECT USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND TO ACT AS PROXIES.

More could be achieved by integrating digital technology into services, and supporting carers in their use of technology. This will be increasingly important as older people who are not connected may require ‘proxy’ helpers to use online public services.

There is great potential for digital technologies to be used to improve care, from helping the helpers develop digital skills and better connecting the social care market, to innovative projects that use digital technology to share caring and provide employment for carers. Similarly older patients using services like Patient Opinion to make their needs known can inform service providers.

The organisation Digital Unite specialises in helping older people use technology, and managing director Emma Solomon emphasises from their experience how important it is to provide the basic starter resources for learners and intermediaries, as well as to innovate. This support is needed on a continuing basis. Emma wrote on our ideas forum that there has been progress in the last decade, however:

“... Some things remain stubbornly persistent; we still meet resistance from scheme staff who don’t have the time or the skills themselves to support residents we might be working with. And basic digital skills and digital intermediary skills are not yet, always, hard wired into the organisations they work for. We don’t so much need more new technology to get round this as a concerted and sustained push on practical,

> www.nominettrust.org.uk

comprehensive, basic digital skills and support mechanisms. That may not be sexy or cutting edge, but that doesn’t mean it’s not important”.

CHALLENGE - how can digital technology be used to enable existing care services and carers, and support different models of social care?

<http://dtlater.wikispaces.com/Provocation+7>

8. USE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES TO ENHANCE EXISTING CONNECTIONS OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS – AND HELP EACH OTHER LEARN.

Free video calls, photo-sharing, email, texting and the use of social networking sites are part of day-to-day communications with family and friends for many people later in life. Family members can help each other learn about digital technologies.

According to Forster Communications, in their **Rites of Passage: Helping people make the best of getting older report**, nearly half of 55-75 year-olds connect to their friends with either Skype or instant messenger services, with a similar proportion spending up to 30 hours on the internet a week. The fastest growing group of Facebook users is aged 50+.

Notes

The Age Action Alliance has developed the Digital Champions Capacity Building Framework for champions working at different levels: the formal role of the professional, employed to provide help; the informal helper who has a passion for digital technology; and the spontaneous helper who may be friend or family, helping out when needed.

Emma Solomon, managing director of Digital Unite, writes in the framework paper:

“The DCCB Framework is not an onerous or complicated concept to implement. It builds on existing programmes and initiatives in the digital skills, digital outreach areas. It collates and extends existing resources, content and collateral. It does not require the creation of anything new - it simply requires the activation, organisation, structuring and support of delivery mechanisms sitting under our noses and inherent in the many and various and diverse organisations that make up our society. Its potential to embed widespread and meaningful digital literacy is enormous”.

CHALLENGE - how can we promote and support the work of older people as digital champions in a way that is sustainable?

<http://dtlater.wikispaces.com/Provocation+9>

> www.nominettrust.org.uk

10. LOOK FOR IDEAS AMONG THOSE PROVIDING DIGITAL TRAINING AND SUPPORT - AND HELP THEM REALISE THEM.

Those working directly with users of digital technology will have insights into what works, and where development would be valuable. With some support they could turn ideas into projects.

Overall we could make more of what we have, through better networking, and connecting the do-ers, thinkers and developers.

Trainers, tutors and mentors will have powerful insights into what is likely to work - but may lack the time or opportunity to turn these insights into new practical applications.

While some organisations have produced excellent guides, they usually concentrate on standard tools and activities. They may not be maintained and updated as short-term projects end.

There are example of sharing and networking, but still relatively small-scale. The Age Action Alliance digital inclusion group is now mapping the activities and resources of their members, and the Nominet Trust and other agencies run networking events.

Overall we could make more of what we have, through better networking, and connecting the do-ers, thinkers and developers.

Nominet Trust
Minerva House
Edmund Halley Road
Oxford Science Park
Oxford OX4 4DQ

t +44 (0)1865 334 000
f +44 (0)1865 332 314
enquiries@nominettrust.org.uk
www.nominettrust.org.uk

Digital technology offers a phenomenal opportunity to stimulate new forms of collaboration, to mobilise new communities of interest, and to unleash the imagination of millions of users in addressing specific local and global challenges.

Nominet Trust believes in harnessing the power of digital technology to improve lives and communities.

As the UK's only dedicated Tech for Good funder, we bring together, invest in and support people committed to using digital technology to create social and economic value.

Through our on-going research programme we identify specific areas of need and channel funding towards initiatives designed to make a significant difference to people's lives.

Since our inception in September 2008, Nominet Trust has invested in hundreds of projects, providing business support as well as financial investment, seeking to make a positive difference to the lives of disadvantages and vulnerable people.

To find out more about our work or how you can apply for funding, please visit: www.nominettrust.org.uk