



Silver surfers

Andy Wright explains why older generations should be taking advantage of the World Wide Web

THE Internet is giving over-65s a new lease of life, yet all the evidence says many have still not reaped the benefits.

A survey commissioned by Age Concern and Barclays, conducted by ICM and published in August 2002, showed that two-thirds of IT users in the 55-plus age group agree the Internet has had a positive impact on their lives. Beyond the statistics, anecdotal evidence is overwhelming.

Dinnie Hawthorne MBE is a wonderful example of those who are using the Internet to make life easier and more fulfilling. She's an active octogenarian: a parish councillor, involved in Bourne End Day Centre and sheltered housing schemes, as well as other local groups. Naturally, she makes extensive use of email to communicate with these wide voluntary networks.

She emailed this excellent example of the liberation that comes with IT and Internet literacy: "A very handicapped, retired lady whom we keep a friendly eye on, got interested in computers a few years ago, signed on at the Cookham Day Centre, and last year designed and sent out all her own computerised Christmas cards."

Dinnie is equally enthusiastic about using the Web, especially for on-line shopping. She said: "It is very tempting and a wonderful and less costly way to shop. For example, after trying to find a pair of special shoes for a disabled person, we eventually found one shop in the UK that stocked them and they were being worn two days later. The Web brought a two year search quickly to an end.

"Also, I cannot speak too highly of online grocery shopping. Goods not only get delivered within 24 hours of ordering –

but (without asking) the very helpful drivers carry our shopping upstairs to our first floor flat and then insist upon carrying it to our kitchen worktop."

Even those who don't use the Internet themselves are benefiting from the online shopping revolution. One example is an elderly lady who didn't have a computer but managed to do her local shopping on-line. How? Her son, who lived in the United States, phoned his mother most weekends. At the same time, he asked her what groceries and provisions she needed. He then ordered them over the Internet and she got them delivered to her door the next day at her house in the UK. With the World Wide Web, distance is no obstacle.

Accessibility features being built into computer operating systems are proving a massive boon. For the partially sighted, most computers have an installed magnifying glass, which has proved invaluable for those waiting to have cataract operations. Also, being able to change the size of the print in every letter or email received is nothing short of miraculous.

To spread these messages, government, local authorities and voluntary groups are spearheading dozens of initiatives: on the one hand, to encourage more and more older people to taste the fruits of technology; and on the other, to educate the rest of us that the Internet should be accessible to all people, regardless of age or physical ability.

Like many other facilities in the Thames Valley, Cookham Day Centre now runs computer courses for the elderly on a one-to-one basis. Local libraries also run small group classes that concentrate on teaching people how to use the email and the Internet. The number of 80-year-old

computer-literate students is rapidly increasing.

Adult learning courses and successful events like the annual Silver Surfers Day may demonstrate the benefits of the Internet to the older generation, but there is concern about a widening divide between the Internet haves and have-nots.

Responding to last year's National Audit Office report on Internet delivery of electronic government services, Alison McCormack, head of new media at Help the Aged, said: "With the numbers of UK Internet users levelling off, it's vital to ensure that we don't end up with a generational digital divide.

"While 'silver surfers' have been the largest growing group of Internet users, with a 90 per cent increase since 2001, they are still under-represented.

"There's a huge need to support with training those who missed out on learning computer skills either in the workplace or at school, both at a national and community level. It is also vital to ensure that the web is accessible and usable for all. Many websites are designed by young people without thought given to older generations. It is unacceptable that those without perfect vision or motor control should be excluded from much of the web's content."

Latest statistics show that just 18 per cent of UK over-65s regularly use the World Wide Web or email. Moreover, there are still many people aged 55-plus who have never tried the Internet, and 66percent of older non-users say they have no intention of ever taking part in the IT revolution. What a lot they are missing.

For more information contact media consultancy Carino Communications on 01628 526005 www.carino.co.uk or email Andy on andy@carino.co.uk