

## **Context and Needs Assessment - Smartphone classes for Seniors**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the feasibility of a training class for seniors on the use of smartphones. For this purpose, the present context and needs assessment has been developed using the library of the city of Lighthouse Point in Florida as the training organization.

The city of Lighthouse Point spans a total area of 2.4 square miles and has a population of 10,953. According to City Data, the estimated median household income reported in 2016 is \$78,937 and the median resident age is 51.0 years, significantly above the median age in Florida. The income per capita is estimated as \$59,755. The median house value is about \$500,000. More than 81% of the households are White alone, 10% Hispanic, and less than 1% Black alone. In 2016, it was estimated that the cost of living index in the city was 119.2 (considering 100 the average value in US) Data also shows that the adult population has almost 17% of Graduate professionals, 48.5 individuals with Bachelor's degree or higher and almost 97% High school or higher.

In short, this is a city with a large senior population, that is affluent, and well-educated, which also receives a large influx of seniors during the winter months.

The Doreen Gauthier Lighthouse Point Library is a municipal institution with an operating budget of more than \$600,000 It contains approximately 37,000 books; more than a 1,000 audio materials; 1,623 video materials; 2 local licensed databases; dozens of state licensed databases and print serial subscriptions.

Considering the characteristics of the residents of the city, a significant number of classes are targeted to seniors, which is the largest population in Lighthouse Point. Most of the

instruction offered has been on finance and investment, taxes, quilting, and crochet. In the technology realm, the library has offered iPad classes for seniors in the past. Those classes were provided once a month and were marketed online through the website and offline with flyers located in the checkout area. Unfortunately, the volunteer teacher had to stop for few months.

According to the Pew Research Center (Technology Use Among Seniors, 2017) affluent, well-educated seniors “report owning and using various technologies at rates similar to adults under the age of 65”. The same research shows that more than 40% of seniors own a smartphone. The number is particularly higher for the groups between 65 and 69 years of age (59%), and the 70-74(49%)

Considering the education level of the residents of Lighthouse Point and their income, it might be safe to assume that a considerable size of the senior population in this city owns a smartphone, since the use of this technology has been correlated to those two parameters. However, the Pew Research also emphasizes that the senior population is still trailing behind in the use of new technologies compared to other age groups

These characteristics point to the fact that smartphone classes targeted to seniors may have a good reception in the population, especially if the instruction is positioned to help seniors understand the possibilities of the technology, as well as its risks. The latter is an important factor to consider since, as it has also been reported by the Pew Research Center (On Smartphone Use, 2017) that about a third of smartphone users don't use simple basic security features such as locking their phones or updating operating systems.

This training will cover the use of health, finance, and learning apps, as well as tips on organizing and saving their photos, connecting with family and friends, and learning about privacy and security.

Despite all the data mentioned above, attracting seniors to technology classes is not easy task. There are many variables affecting their willingness to attend such training.

The US population is getting older and longevity has also prolonged. This means that seniors find themselves in the need to learn how to manage chronic conditions, or the decline of their physical and mental abilities, as well as maintain social contact with their peers not only for fun but even for therapeutic purposes. For that matter, new technologies, and particularly smartphones, are providing opportunities for constant and fast communication, lifelong learning experiences, and entertainment.(Chiu 2016) Mitzner indicates that “An AARP (2008) report showed that older adults are willing to use a wide range of technologies to maintain social connections, gather information, be safe at home, and promote their personal health and wellness” (Mitzner, 1710)

Learning new technologies may be frightening for some individuals. Technology anxiety related with self-confidence is a common phenomenon. Petrina indicates that “older adults often appear to be technophobic but there is a broad variation of relations to technology” (Petrina, 384) Fear may be less prevalent than our stereotypes portray. Mitzner results, for instance, “contradict stereotypes that older adults are afraid or unwilling to use technology”. Nonetheless, it is important to carefully plan not only how the training is marketed to seniors but how the classes are structured.

If the training offers seniors the chance to get the most of their phone to help them live an independent life, it might be enough incentive to come to the classes even if the challenge of learning might make them reluctant. The goal is to show them that learning to use the varied capabilities of the phone, will make them more independent, by taking care of their own needs, with the help of apps. In order to attract seniors, like the ones living in Lighthouse Point, it might be a good practice to promote the training in a way that gives them back autonomy. They wouldn't want to feel they are being overprotected. Instead, the key consists in showing them the personal autonomy and self empowerment they will regain if they learn as much as they can about smartphones. Wang affirms that "it is the perceived benefits of technological products that matter to older adults"(Wang, 803). Additionally, Macedo mentions that new technologies offer a "wide range of benefits [...], which include, but are not restricted to benefits related to social and self-understanding (e.g. increased access to current affairs and health information), interaction benefits (e.g.increased connectivity and social support) and task-oriented goals(e.g. ICT-assisted work, travel, shopping and financial management)" (Macedo, 936) Reminders for walking or taking pills, using uber for safe transportation or simply connecting with friends via phone or text messages, not to mention learning another language, may provide mental stimulation and emotional strength. Hill added that these new technologies help overcome some of the physical and geographical barriers associated with aging" (Hill, 415)

It is important, when planning for these classes, to apply techniques that, according to Barnard, support learning "through step by step guidance, providing a friendly space to use trial and error methods, and/or provision of a manual" (Barnard, 1715) In the paper published in 2019, Chiu suggests that instructors "should consider the ever-changing learning

situations and the needs of the elderly learners” (Chiu, 61). In other words, classes need to convey different solutions and possibilities for different individuals so it is important to offer flexibility and a welcoming environment independently of the level of each individual on the use of the technology.

Teaching about smartphones may bring seniors an additional advantage. Barnard and other researchers indicate that “Training is not only about skills, it may have a positive influence on both attitudes towards technology and self-efficacy of the recipients” (Barnard, 1716). On the same note, Heis affirms that “pedagogical strategies for seniors should be focused on self-confidence [and provide for] creativity, sociability, affection, curiosity, and personal development. (Heis, 270)

Heis offers a list of strategies to improve the digital inclusion of the elderly by using mobile devices. Some of them are include even exercises with clay to learn the necessary finger pressure on touch screens. She also encourages training related with communications which in most cases is the main objective and try to involve family members when possible. Ideally, the training should only use applications with no advertising to not confuse or distract the senior students.

In summary, the population of Lighthouse Point may benefit from a series of classes in the use of smartphones. The seniors already have the means and the equipment. What is necessary is to provide them a welcoming environment that encourages practice, questions, and helps them navigate all the possibilities this technology has to offer to improve their lives.

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