Context

Digital Engagement is a policy that promotes positive and comprehensive inclusion and participation of all Australians, but particularly older people, as citizens in the digital world – in government, commercial businesses and for leisure. It is predicated on making secure and adequate online access available at low cost, with ongoing training and support, and at the same time addressing the challenges for those who cannot be digitally engaged. An inclusive society will assist those who can participate as well as maintaining services and supports for those who cannot. A digital-only policy – whether from government, business, or academia can be seen as a form of ageism.

Government agencies and service providers such as banks and retail stores have shifted a wider range of functions to an online delivery method. Non-digital interactions are becoming less of a choice as society increasingly moves to a digital first future. Whilst some older people are embracing a digital future, others are being left behind with some older Australians disadvantaged in their access to services and functions.

The Australian Government's Report "Understanding the digital behaviours of older Australians"[1], noted in 2019 that digital literacy is low in the older population, with approximately 34% of Australians aged 50 years and over (about 2.7 million people) having either low digital literacy levels or not using digital devices or the internet. However, there are indications that things are changing. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA)[2] found that, as of June 2020 some 93 percent of older Australians had internet access in their home, while some 78 percent used their mobile phone to go online. Of course, such figures do not reflect levels of skill, nor the financial hardship possibly associated with maintaining such access.

The negative aspect of digital engagement is that older people may lack the skills, resources or confidence to maintain their cybersecurity and be more open to online scams and attacks, with data highlighting that older Australians have become significantly more susceptible to internet and phone-related scams or attacks.[3]

Older Persons' Experience

Australians aged 65 years and over are the most digitally excluded age group (49.7, or 13.3 points below the national average) and this increased to 21.8 points for those aged 80 years and over[4].

The reasons for this can be either experiential (they never used digital tools during their working life and have had no opportunity or need to learn how to use them), financial (they lack the resources to gain and maintain access, or to get the skills needed), or physical (for example, vision impairment or cognitive decline).

Additionally, COTA's research[5] shows that older Australians overwhelmingly want non-internet options of interaction to remain available regardless of whether they use the internet or not. Postal mail and the telephone are believed to be credible and safe for personal or sensitive information particularly from government.

While many older Australians will embrace digitisation, non-digital forms of communication with older people should continue to be available. Even people who said they were confident in using digital technology now, were concerned about the future impact of changes to their physical and cognitive capacity on their ability to use digital means of communications. In addition, older people's acceptance of digital communication is based on trust. Older people who are distrustful of government and/or technology give compelling reasons for their suspicion, from "robodebt" to

Endorsed: 27 June 2023
Review date: 27 June 2025

cybercrime. This distrust is often bound up with concerns about privacy and the misuse of personal information.

The effects of society moving only to digital may be both significant and quite diverse for individuals. Including :

- an inability to engage with the Government through a MyGov account,
- access to monitoring emergency situations in their vicinity, or
- having to pay in cash for goods or services.

Consequently, a proportion of older people may need ongoing training and financial support to gain confidence, maintain access and engagement in the digital domain as both citizens and consumers. In addition, non-digital service options need to continue to be available for those who can't engage in the digital world.

The Australian Government addresses the requirements for training and support for people over 50 years of age through the "Be Connected" Program. This program provides $20M per year to fund community organisations throughout Australia who help older Australians learn digital skills. The program is administered through the Good Things Foundation, which provides grants between $1,000 and $50,000 to eligible organisations that provide this service to participants. The format of the program means that it is only delivered where there are community organisations willing and able to deliver training, and the lack of significant funding means that it is episodic at best – thus depriving older people of the repeated training and practice required to absorb and retain new skills.

The ability and capacity of older Australians to become and remain engaged in the digital environment is increasingly vital to their ability to retain their autonomy in the modern world. Nevertheless, it is a matter of human rights that the Australian government retains the means for those without digital skills to access the services and support they need.

Action Required

It is vital for government and other stakeholders to think and act in an inclusive way. Government should develop a digital inclusion strategy for older Australians and an ageing Australia. This strategy should, at a minimum:

- Bring together older people and other stakeholders, including States, Territories, internet service providers (ISP) and mobile phone companies.
- Develop a coherent approach to the provision of ongoing training and support to allow older Australians to feel comfortable and capable in their digital interactions.
- Develop a coherent approach to educating older Australians about scams, disinformation, conspiracy theories and other knowledge threats.
- Be appropriately funded and prioritised to achieve its aims fast enough to avoid digital obsolescence.

In addition to the Strategy Government should:

- Have a concierge or interface service at all Services Australia offices or by phone. This would allow a skilled government official to complete digital transactions on behalf of the older person either in person or by phone.

- Retain postal letters as a means of communications between the federal government and older persons that request it.
- Ensure that consultation processes retain face-to-face or phone components, so that the digitally disadvantaged are not further marginalised.
- Develop free education modules for community-based staff and volunteers (including peer educators) who offer IT training to older people who choose to enhance their IT skills and capacity. Require the NBN to provide a "basic but adequate" type of service with both sufficient speed and data allowances to service the needs of all income support recipients. This should be considered part of the NBN's Community Services Obligation,
- Introduce a "Pensioner's Digital Supplement" similar to the Energy Supplement, to specifically assist Age Pension recipients to engage digitally.

Outside of direct Government responsibility it will be important that:

- All residential age care facilities provide adequate Wi-Fi networks for the use of their residents, as well as training as part of their activity programs to enable older people to maintain connections and manage their affairs online effectively and safely if they choose to.
- Older people being supported at home should have access to digital training and support as a standard feature of their aged care package.
- Telecommunications businesses must provide a range of low-cost data and telephone plans that facilitate digital engagement.

Related policies

To be listed

[1] Digital behaviours of older Australians, Australian Government, May 2018, https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Understanding-digital-behaviours-older-Australians-summary-report-2018.pdf
[2] "Communications and media in Australia: The digital lives of older Australians", ACMA, May 2021
[3] Scam statistics | Scamwatch
[4] Home - Australian Digital Inclusion Index
[5] Non digital Communication Preferences of Older Australians

Endorsed: 27 June 2023
Review date: 27 June 2025