



2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review

Submission

Prepared by COTA WA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COTA WA has been actively involved in enabling seniors to access technology to bridge the digital divide. As the population ages, the number of government agencies and organisations servicing seniors is growing and most are making (or have already made) the internet their preferred means of information and service delivery (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). This suggests that those without the means to use the internet may be at a significant disadvantage.

Ability to use the Internet is determined by many factors, including technical issues, which NBN may resolve. However, the human aspect of Internet usage is as great an issue as the technical.

For people in country areas of Western Australia, access to and usage of telecommunications technology is even more difficult than for city based seniors. Services (broadband and mobile phone connection) are relatively poor even within 100km of Perth.

In 2011 we published, *Where do I start? Female seniors and the Internet*, a consumer research report by the COTA WA and supported by a grant from the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN).

The information in this submission comes from a survey conducted through the Western Australian Community Resource Network (WACRN). This research supports the CRC model:

- Western Australian CRC's can be seen as a model way to assist small rural and remote communities with their IT needs, but it is essential that adequate funding and staff be provided to deliver the services required.

Various recommendations were made in *Where do I start? Female seniors and the Internet* which have relevance to both city and country dwelling seniors.

1. BACKGROUND

COTA WA has been actively involved in enabling seniors to access computers and mobile phones to bridge the digital divide. As long ago as 1996, we established a Seniors' Technology Centre through which over 10000 seniors gained knowledge of and facility with computer use. In more recent times we have run seniors' technology days which seniors attend to get help and advice with computers, mobile phones and other electronic devices, and we have funding to run similar sessions for older women in 2012.

As the population ages, the number of government agencies and organisations servicing seniors is growing and most are making (or have already made) the internet their preferred means of information and service delivery (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). This suggests that those without the means to use the internet may be at a significant disadvantage. Over the coming years, particularly as the National Broadband Network (NBN) is rolled out, even more emphasis will be placed on electronic information access and it will become increasingly important for all Australians to have access to the Internet. Of particular importance to seniors, is the development of e-health technology, but access to all services will become increasingly difficult without Internet use, potentially disadvantaging many people who are on the wrong side of the "digital divide".

Ability to use the Internet is determined by many factors, including technical issues, which NBN may resolve. However, the human aspect of Internet usage is as great an issue as the technical. Issues that determine an individual's effective use of electronic technology include skills, knowledge and willingness to use electronic technology, cost barriers, convenience, familiarity with the medium and its user friendliness as well as the availability and appropriateness of technical and other support.

In 2011 we published, *Where do I start? Female seniors and the Internet*, a consumer research report by the COTA WA and supported by a grant from the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN). While focussing on female seniors (older women being amongst the least likely to have accessed the Internet recently or have access to a computer at home), these research findings also apply to some older men who experience similar difficulties. Men who have been in manual jobs which do not require computer use, for example, have few computer skills when they retire, and we are aware that age discrimination reduces access to older workers to training in IT skills.

For people in country areas, access to and usage of telecommunications technology is even more difficult than for city based seniors. Services (broadband and mobile phone connection) are relatively poor even within 100km of Perth.

Training and support is largely unavailable in small country towns (and most country towns in WA are very small) and there is lack of competition amongst providers to drive prices down. At the same time, country dwellers require even better information services than their city counterparts as alternative facilities and means of access to information are few and often very far between. For this reason, it is imperative that barriers to Internet and mobile telephony usage by seniors are addressed through both technical improvements and measures suggested in *Where do I start? Female seniors and the Internet* as well as the more recent Regional Survey, details of which follow.

2. REGIONAL SURVEY 2011

The information in this submission comes from a survey conducted through the Western Australian Community Resource Network (WACRN).

This regional community service programme began in 1991 as a trial project in Broome (2,237 km north of Perth) with the help of a Federal Government grant. By 2000, there were 77 Centres, then called Telecentres, operating around the State. Funding proved a problem, but the situation improved in 2009 when the State Government's 'Royalties for Regions' programme provided an assured source of financial support. The name of the centres was changed to Community Resource Centres (CRC's) and the programme quickly expanded. There are now about 113 such centres and many of them are still becoming established.

This regional community service is provided in special centres that aim to stimulate communities in the creative use of telecommunications, computing technology, information access, education, employment, training and business enterprise.

3. DATA COLLECTION

All the regional CRC's were contacted via their email addresses and asked whether they would like to provide information for the submission. The Manager/Coordinators of thirteen centres enthusiastically replied, and a questionnaire was sent to them for distribution to men and women of 60 years and over (50+ for indigenous Australians) who used their services and others that they knew in the area. In addition, the Manager/Coordinators were asked to comment about their observations and experiences in dealing with seniors and their information technology needs. This latter feedback was particularly revealing. Comments from coordinators (**indented with different font**) are included in the text after the separate headings.

Surveys came from 11 Centres and comments and observations from four more. No surveys or manager's comments were received from remote Aboriginal communities. However, there are significant Aboriginal populations in some other CRC areas, and Coordinators said that members of these groups were frequent users of the Centres. Responses from Aboriginal seniors in these areas are included in the sample. Altogether, seventy-nine surveys were returned, partially or fully completed.

Demographic details of respondents

Sex: Of those who gave details (71 surveys) 44% were male and 56% were female.

Country of Origin (71 surveys): Almost three-quarters of respondents were born in Australia. Of the rest, most came from the UK and had generally been in Australia for many, many years.

Location: Respondents came from as far north as Broome (2,2437 km from Perth), as far west as Kalbarri (586km/6¹/₂ hours from Perth), Greenbushes in the south (268 km from Perth), and

Norseman in the east (800km/8+ hours from Perth), with the majority of centres clustered in the south-west and wheat belt of WA.

Age of respondents: Of the 72 respondents who answered the question on age, 12.5% were aged 50-60 years, and close to half of the sample were aged 65-74 years. A further 8% were 80-84 years, and two males ticked the 85-89 and 90+ boxes respectively.

Residential Situation: Of those who answered this question (72), roughly one-third lived alone and two-thirds lived with their spouse/partner.

Qualifications: Twenty-nine per cent of respondents did not answer this question. Of the 56 seniors who did tick a box, over 60% had limited formal education; they had learnt their skills through life experiences, augmented by short courses and on-the-job training. One quarter of respondents had completed a TAFE course or equivalent, or held a diploma in fields such as book-keeping, nursing, education, business or agricultural management. A further 14% had a bachelors or higher degree.

Daily Activities: Some of the seniors in the sample were still in paid employment, and this tended to be half-time or part-time, and people in the 50-60 age bracket were more likely to work longer hours. However, this varied considerably; one man in the 80-84 age bracket indicated that spent one third of his time on paid work. Almost 60% of those who answered this question said they did voluntary work. This ranged from a few hours to 80% of their time, and about half of them spent time educating themselves.

4. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SURVEY

Access to Computers: Almost 80% of the sample (77 respondents) had a computer at home and seven more had access to a computer when they wanted one (usually at the local CRC). Of these people, half of them used a computer *daily*, another 25% used the computer *several times per week*, while the remainder (16%) used the computer *weekly*, often on visits to the CRC. There were two respondents who had a computer at home, but never used it, and two more who said they were building up their confidence with classes.

“In my experience, very few seniors would own, or want to own a computer.”

“Many seniors have their own computer at home and a few use the computers at the CRC, but we need to run more courses to bring rural and remote communities up to par with the knowledge needed to use it.”

“There is certainly a group of people who want to use the facilities the internet provides but don’t want to do it themselves and hopefully that’s where we can help them.”

What the computer was used for

Sixty-four seniors gave information about how they used their computers, and we can assume that the 19% who did not answer the question were not very comfortable with the technology. Those who used their computers were active in several areas: they used it for *emails* (79.6%), for *playing games* (42%), to *get information* (73.4%), and *as a word-processor* (61%). Other uses mentioned were banking (5 people), photos (4 people), business & spread-sheets (5

people), and occasional on-line shopping, desktop publishing, map reading, and Facebook were each mentioned by one person.

Connecting to Government Departments

Of the total sample, 11% did not answer this question. Of those who did, 60% had connected to a government department via the computer. Some of these people used the computer regularly in the workplace (3), others used it frequently for a variety of reasons. It appeared that confidence in connecting to official agencies was a product of general familiarity and confidence with computer technology. Reasons for non-connection that were mentioned included: the need for training, and the slowness of connection in their area.

For seniors, the CRC's offer a range of services, including Broadband for Seniors internet kiosk, Medicare Easyclaim booth, Centrelink access point, Seniors' and Departments for Veterans Affairs information, as well as training in various IT technologies. However, seniors still often have difficulty accessing the information required, as the following comments show:

"It's usually seniors who use the government information access point, and nearly all of them require assistance to use the computer, locate and print information required."

One CRC coordinator said that "more and more government and non-government departments are reluctant to send out any forms and tell customers to download them, so many seniors (and non seniors) come in to our Centre for assistance. Some examples: Western Power: In order to claim the \$80 rebate for outages of power of more than 12 hours, customers are told to fill in a form on-line; Centrelink: the CRC Centrelink access point has a phone, fax and a few booklets, but no forms – clients are told to download required forms; WA Police Dept: Farmers are advised to lodge their gun licence online, then print off a form with a specific bar code to be scanned and processed at the Post Office; Department for Communities: obtaining a Seniors Card rebate application form for security screens and fire alarms; Department of Transport: lodging crash reports. All of these processes require direction from us and often we have to complete the task for them. Many of our seniors are asked to email items such as driver's licence to authorities – we scan the documents and usually email on their behalf."

"We have set up a Government booth that we have made senior friendly (includes a touch screen and BIG lettering) but they still like us to do it for them."

"I fear that they [seniors] are being left behind in this area. We only recently fought to retain our Medicare booth – a phone service that has taken many of the seniors who use it some time to learn, and more importantly to be comfortable and confident with it. I was amazed at the assumption by government that they could just remove it and everyone could just use on-line services; it showed a total disregard for their clients and lack of understanding of their needs."

"The increased delivery of government and other services on-line has meant that our senior community members (including indigenous) have been further disadvantaged how can people who were never fortunate enough to have received a sound formal education be expected to just sit and receive training from online website delivery?"

Desire to use the computer more?

The questions, “*would you like to use the computer more?*” and “*do you need help to do this?*” produced some interesting responses. Seven people did not answer the question, and of the others, 40% said ‘no’. In the context of their responses generally, the reason appeared to be either that they were already using it a lot, or, alternatively, they found it far too confusing and were not interested in using it any more. The other 60% were keen to use the technology, but recognised that they needed help to do so effectively. Two people specifically mentioned wanting to use the computer for Skype contact.

“A significant proportion of seniors are keen to learn how to use a computer and to increase their skills.”

“90% of seniors are reasonably keen to learn the new technology, but are hesitant to try anything by themselves.”

“. . . and for those who are prepared to use the internet . . . it’s a big step, like learning a new language. . . . I have found that you must use a subject that the senior is interested in to teach them. It almost works like a reward process then, as when they navigate to the right place it provides them with something of interest that they want to know about.”

Re training seniors, “approximately 30% will take this information home and are confident to build on their knowledge by themselves; another 20% won’t touch a computer unless they have one-on-one supervision (and it’s an uphill battle – they are just scared of technology; the remaining 50% will use what they have learnt but are tentative to expand their use and will ring me or come in for further help.”

“I find seniors are happier for us to look up information over the internet as they do find it hard to find specific items and are just not confident using computers.”

“We do get a lot of people, of varying ages, come into the centre and ask us to complete IT jobs for them, from looking up information on the internet to sending information via email for them.”

Which training options (in bold italic) would be most helpful to you?

Just over one-third of the sample did not answer the question; the rest wanted help of some kind. Almost 60% chose training courses, and for half of these folk, either **group courses** or **one-on-one training** would be acceptable. The rest favoured either group or one-on-one training. The other 40% chose “advice when required” as their preferred form of assistance with a big proportion saying either **phone advice** or **on-line help** would be acceptable. Often seniors who chose on-line advice were already fairly adept at computer use. One person wished for free on-line training courses, while one woman summed up her training needs by saying that she would be grateful for any sort of training. Another person thought that CRC staff should be trained to offer help when needed.

An important role for most CRC's is to offer targeted computer training. Many Centres either had, or were looking into obtaining, special computers for seniors through the NEC Broadband for Seniors' programme. The programme offered one hour one-on-one training in three areas (computer use, email, internet), plus free internet access.

The WA Department Training & Workforce Development provides funding for introductory computer courses – First and Second Click at the CRC's. These free courses are very popular and most of the students are seniors. Other popular courses at some Centres are: 'getting to know the internet', 'internet shopping', and getting to know social net-working' and digital camera lessons.

Re Training Options:

Group Courses:

"Face-to-face training is most effective, and preferred by seniors."

"We rated our First and Second Click courses as hugely successful; only one of the nine students was not a senior. Two seniors took their new laptops along to sessions to learn how to use them. In *Second Click*, students were taught such things as booking tickets on-line, on-line banking, & checking the weather."

"All the students were seniors, including a 90 and 94-year old. Most of those people attended for the fun of it and despite their trepidation with the technology, enjoyed the social participation, exercising their brains and they love the creative side of computers." Nevertheless, they were often reluctant to use their computers at home for fear they might break something without the oversight of CRC staff.

One-on-one Training:

"Most seniors lack confidence in, or are intimidated by technology – one-on-one lessons are the most effective for teaching them."

". . . . they do prefer being able to talk to a real person in a class situation, or one-on-one – which we are happy to do."

Phone:

Personal assistance is best, but "telephone assistance is the next best thing and has worked quite well for me in the past."

However, another coordinator observed:

"you'd have to be very patient and have plenty of time to spare."

On-line Help:

"Many government websites have on-line tutorials – all of which are useless if you can't use a mouse or fully understand how to navigate on-line websites."

"On-line advice would be of little use for seniors who initially struggle to navigate around web pages."

When coordinators were asked whether they believed that the only realistic way to assist older folk with information technology was by personal help, they gave the following responses:

“Yes, yes, yes, personalised assistance with a patient and caring instructor is the only way to assist the elderly.”

“Our seniors like real people to talk to and help them.”

[Seniors] “. . . often come to me upset because “people’ on the other end of the phone just do not listen to them or just talk ‘double-dutch’ to them confusing them further.”

Role of CRC’s

Regarding getting general advice about their computers, country people do not have many options – the closest computer-shop many be many kilometres away. So the first port of call is usually the CRC.

“From my experience . . . people (not only seniors), appreciate receiving information in person from a real person, rather than by any other means. Some will do initial research on-line or by other means, but when it comes to buying, it’s always helpful to talk to another person to discuss experiences and to receive a considered opinion by a knowledgeable person first.”

“We get quite a few seniors wanting help – with email particularly.”

“All the oldies come and ask me for help at the CRC – have done for years.”

“Seniors who don’t attend classes would rather we helped them with anything to do with technology . . . especially information on the internet.”

“Having informed, patient, and caring trainers is a must, otherwise they feel self-conscious, ‘stupid’, etc”

In one area, a fairly large population of retired farmers were very keen to learn how to use the computer and access the internet.

“I thoroughly enjoy teaching them [seniors]. I love the way they are amazed at simple things the computer can do and how grateful they are that you take time with them.”

Plans to Help Seniors Develop Confidence with Technology

One CRC was planning to;

“set up a seniors computer club. We also intend to develop a relationship with the Men’s Shed to offer computer training.”

“local computer clubs, great for networking and learning in a safe environment.

Would you pay someone to access the computer for you?

This question received an emphatic 'no' from three-quarters of those who responded to the question, although others could see some value in paying for needed help.

One coordinator made the observation that:

“subsidised/funded services enable us to deliver affordable and targeted training/support to seniors in our community.”

5. MOBILE PHONES

Do you own a mobile phone?

Only three people did not answer this question. Of the others, 78% owned a mobile, and 22% did not. However, only one person in the entire sample owned a satellite mobile phone and this was kept only in case of car trouble.

How useful is your mobile to you?

Just over one-quarter did not respond, and just over 40% found their mobiles very useful (4 people said they were essential), another 15% said they were “somewhat useful”, “quite useful” or “50/50”, while a further 15% found their mobiles “useless”, “not much use” or said they “never use it”. A further 7% kept their mobiles just for emergencies, such as car breakdowns.

In terms of communication, mobile phones were clearly not widely used, most people connected with others via landline phone or personal contact. A few also mentioned email as a means of communication, and some were familiar with Skype.

“Most seniors are given mobile phones by their family members as an ‘emergency’ device, but seniors struggle to grasp how to effectively use.”

“One of our recent volunteers (who is very senior) had problems with his home phone. He called Telstra to try and get a new one, but ended up with a modern wireless gadget with instructions on a CD about how to install it. The poor gentleman had no idea what to do with it. I think salespeople need to be more aware when selling such things to seniors.”

“We would help a senior at least once a week with their mobile phone. They are more comfortable to talk to us than other people, as we take our time explaining what we are doing so hopefully they can do it next time.”

“Most seniors have a traditional phone/landline in their homes and are confident using it.”

6. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY GENERALLY

Comments by seniors:

“It gets very confusing with the speed of change in technology” (female)

“Even basic skills aren’t sufficient to deal with the details. Eg transferring photos from camera to the computer – settings have changed. I can no longer do it. I have done nothing to change it and don’t want to pay \$90 for call out (can’t afford). Where do I get advice re changing servers? Even if I could afford cost of change, would need someone beside me to do it. Still haven’t mastered the mobile.” (female 75-79).

“The younger usually have the use of computers at home and also they learn about computers at school and consequently they pick up information technology easily. However, the older generation, over 55’s really struggle with Information Technology, since they do not have the background.” (female 55-54)

“I now find my ipad very quick and can see the day when it will supersede my computer. There should be some training in this and smart phones.” (male 70-74)

“Slow but learning.” (female 60-64)

“Scared stiff.” (female 65-69)

“A little at a time (very little).” (female 55-59)

“Computer training courses at the CRC are completely useless for me. I get the help I need from my children faster and easier to understand.” (male 70-74)

“A bit slow to connect.” (person 75-79)

“[computers] can be a useful tool when they cooperate.” (female 60-64)

“I use a satellite connection for internet access – no landline available.” (male 80-84)

“I like to keep on learning to help keep up with modern communication.” (female 70-74)

“It’s fascinating but difficult to keep up with changes.” (person 65-69)

“Difficult to access regular training for IT in rural communities – ourCRC offers support and training when funding and staff resources allow.” (female 50-54)

“I hate it – it’s more time consuming.” (male 65-69)

“Frustrating!” (female 65-69)

“I’m appreciative of broadband for seniors as it’s easy to access, help is available and while I keep learning something, I won’t get old.” (female 60-64).

“Information technology makes seniors feel they are ‘not of this world’ (quote). There are so many ‘gadgets’ available now and we find most seniors are too frightened or intimidated to have a go. Targeted training with groups of seniors breaks down these barriers and seniors gain confidence with technology in a comfortable environment, knowing they are not alone. Through funding over the last few years our CRC has offered the following classes: 1) *How to use a mobile phone*, 2) *How to use a digital camera*, 3) *Introduction in how to use a PC*, and 4) *Introduction to Emailing*. All are well-attended.”(coordinator)

7. CONCLUSION

It is conceivable that difficulty in using Information Technology is a generational phenomenon, but there are always likely to be people who will have problems mastering it. The funded and subsidised Community Resource Centres that have been discussed in this submission appear to be an effective way of ensuring that government services continue to be available to *all* Australians regardless of their IT proficiency. However, it is apparent that many CRC’s in rural areas are experiencing considerable pressure in trying to meet the needs of their clients, and only manage to help as much as they do with the aid of local volunteers.

It is unreasonable for government departments – local, state and federal, to increase their efficiency and reduce costs by off-loading their responsibilities onto other agencies and volunteers. This universal move to computer management and the familiarity of government staff with the technology must not be accompanied by the assumption that their clients are equally familiar with computer technology.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The research conducted through the CRC's supports many of the recommendations of *Where do I start? Female seniors and the Internet*:

- Widely available, low-cost training aimed at improving digital media literacy skills, and targeted promotion of the benefits of the Internet and broadband for seniors.
- Better consumer protection and customer service in the communications market. The Australian Communications and Media Authority's 'Reconnecting the Customer' Inquiry report and implementation is a significant opportunity to deliver better outcomes for consumers.
- Advice and assistance services to enable seniors to navigate the market.
- More reliable and accessible technical support services for seniors.
- Provision of more targeted government-sponsored cyber security and safety campaigns.
- Consultation with seniors on e-government matters.

And, in addition, the research supports the CRC model:

- Western Australian CRC's can be seen as a model way to assist small rural and remote communities with their IT needs, but it is essential that adequate funding and staff be provided to deliver the services required.

It may be useful to be commission further work on seniors' access to electronic technology in country areas with a view to identifying key barriers to Internet and mobile telephony usage and strategies to overcome the digital divide so that all older people have affordable and equitable access to these services.