

## *the Eureka Connection*

### **Enabling Isolated Seniors to Engage and Connect Online *at home or in care***

#### **Why should Senior Citizens engage and connect Online?**

Remaining productive and socially connected as we age can be a major contribution to our health and wellbeing. However this is not always easy for many senior citizens. Isolation, either at home or in residential care, can increase as we get older and this can reduce our opportunities to engage and connect.

Our programs provide seniors with the capability to remain productive, engaged and connected using a range of digital technologies on the Internet to suit them. For many reasons we may not be able to get out as much as we would like or engage in many of the community activities we used to. We may now live far from friends and family who lead busy lives and rarely have time to visit. While it's great to be involved and meet up in person, this is often no longer possible. We enable seniors by helping them to engage with the online environment in a way that suits their needs.

For most young people being physically isolated is not such an issue as they now do most things online anywhere and anytime. However, few elderly citizens have access to appropriate technologies or have the relevant skills to do so. While not the solution for everyone, social use of the Internet can help overcome the isolation of the elderly, reconnecting them to family, friends, and community to improve their wellbeing and, where appropriate, enabling them to remain productive members of society.



## Who are the Eureka Connection?

Members of the Eureka Connection are seniors ourselves who have kept up with the computer revolution at work and in most aspects of our lives outside work. Over the past three years, we have been passing on our knowledge to other seniors by setting up and running Compute Kiosks in Aged Care Facilities as you see above. This has been most rewarding for us as well as the residents.

## What can Seniors do Online to Enrich their Lives?

There is a large body of evidence that remaining active, socially connected and emotionally satisfied are major contributors to health and wellbeing. Research shows that areas most concerned with social and emotional wellbeing are: (1) social participation and involvement, (2) occupation, (3) control over daily life and (4) dignity. It is great when you can get out and about to satisfy your needs in these areas but, when this is not possible, some online activities can do almost as well. Here are some activities to be considered in each of these four areas.

(1) social participation and involvement: connecting via email and Skype; exchanging family pictures and videos; joining online communities; using social media

(2) occupation: enrolling in an online course (MOOC); volunteering or paid work such as editing or mentoring; writing and publishing a blog or a book or just surfing the net.

(3) control over daily life: online banking; shopping and booking online; interacting with tradespeople; using mygov facilities.

(4) dignity: keeping up to date with news, movies, fashion; having a say on twitter or the Conversation.

Even being able to do one or two of these activities could greatly enrich someone's life.

## Eureka Connection in Care

Eureka Connection has been setting up and running Computer Kiosks in Aged Care facilities as well as helping others to do this. We have learnt a lot by doing this and have had some wonderful results. See our pamphlet "Computer Kiosks for Residents in Aged Care"

## Eureka Connection at Home

This is where we would like to go next as we have talked to many people who are concerned for their parents and grandparents who live alone or as a couple at home with little social contacts. We see a great need to help some of these people get set up and learn to use computer technology to suit them. From our experience with Computer Kiosks in Aged Care, we envisage a service which could be provided to get seniors started online as we explain below.

## How to get started

Experience has taught us that there are four basics for either an in care or at home service to get seniors started with computers. These are

1. **Get the technology basics:** Many older people already have a computer or have access to one. Maybe they just need to have it set up so and help learning to use it for what they want and need. If they don't have a computer, or have one that is not suitable, maybe they need some advice on what to get that suits them and their budget. If money is a problem there are free reconditioned computers available through Seniors ComputerClubs.
2. **Get connected to the Internet.** This is where most seniors need help and advice. There is increasingly free WIFI in public places and even some aged-care facilities. There are different home options that vary in price and suitability.
3. **Getting some introductory lessons and ongoing help as needed:** For many seniors it is best when they learn basic computing skills on the computer device they will continue to use. What they learn needs to be individualised for their own capability, needs and interest. Seniors also need some way to get appropriate ongoing help as they need it. There could be commercial aged-care services for those who can afford it or a set of volunteers for those who can't. These helpers would need to understand the elderly as much, or even more, than having in depth knowledge of computing.
4. **Setting up online communities** perhaps with a face-to-face element where the isolated elderly can connect to get help, share experiences and engage in a community for all sorts of reasons.

## Some things to consider:

As computer-users, older people have a number of particular characteristics that can be a challenge. Some have never used computers whilst others feel that their skills are out of date leading to concerns about a lack of skills and knowledge. They can have anxieties about technology, fears of doing something wrong and concerns about privacy, security or inappropriate online behaviour. There are many concepts that those who have grown up in the digital age take for granted that are quite foreign to someone who has seldom used a computer before. People who undertake to help or tutor the elderly computer users need, above all, patience and the perception to understand how the elderly learner sees the world. Quite a low level of computer literacy is needed as long as the tutor acknowledges their limitations and is able to get help when this is reached.

Additionally, older people may have physical impediments that impair their computer use such as diminished eye-sight or hearing, poor dexterity or fading memory. Some just have no concept of what a computer connected to the Internet can do.

Learning is fun at any age! People of all ages need to learn as individuals what they are capable of doing and what they want to do. While some challenges increase with age, older people all have different attributes, capabilities, desires and needs. It may take time for progress to be made but any progress is an advantage. Learning is much more fun together, so individualised tuition in a small group setting is great if it can be arranged.

We all know that technology at times can be frustrating so, if nothing else, the elderly need to know that if something doesn't work it's not their fault and that learning how to troubleshoot is the best skill of all.

## Setting up an online community

See <http://eurekaconnection.wikispaces.com/>

## The last word

There is an ageist view that learning to use computers is beyond older people. Moreover most aged-care policies assume that because elderly people have ceased working, they have also ceased being productive or, at least, proactive in adopting new ways to maintain social connections. There are plenty of examples where this is not the case.

Maintaining an intellectually challenging and contemplative mindset, and identifying activities that will be meaningful and therefore personally satisfying, lead to productive ageing that is in the best interests of both society and the individual.