

# IT industry ignores silver surfers at its peril

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### ***Design for seniors to tap market, industry urged***

Hardware and software vendors are foolish to ignore the needs of the growing population of older computer and information technology users, the so-called "silver surfers." US researchers offer convincing evidence in a monograph to be published in the International Journal of Intercultural Information Management that from the business perspective, seniors represent a rapidly growing sector of the market with the most disposable income to spend on these companies' products.

Mark McMurtrey, Ronald McGaughey, James Downey and Steven Zeltmann of the Department of Management Information Systems at the University of Central Arkansas, in Conway, have brought together three research streams to show how the senior population is increasingly "wired." Their evidence suggests that manufacturers are foolish in their failure to address the needs of this part of society, which often has disabilities - sight and hearing problems, issues with dexterity and cognitive deficits - that would benefit from specialist input and output hardware and software designed for greater accessibility. Moreover, it is a matter of social responsibility that such companies ought to address the needs of all of society and not just the younger generation and able bodied.

The researchers pulled together information and data from three main sources. First, data from the US Census' current population reports (and other US Census Bureau statistics). Secondly, results reported in three large-scale studies by SeniorNet, the largest promoter of elderly computer and internet use in the world. And, lastly findings from a range of scholarly investigations with high citation numbers from the research literature. They hoped that the fusion of these resources would allow them to shed considerable light on the issue of senior citizens and their access and use of information technology.

The most apparent finding from the work is that seniors use information technology in much the same way as other people irrespective of age: they shop online, research topics of interest, stay in touch with friends and relatives, and carry out a multitude of other tasks from maintaining a Facebook presence to tweeting regularly, as do almost all other sectors of society. Likewise, many seniors use mobile technology, including cell phones, just as commonly as younger people. Given the physical and cognitive disabilities many people face as they get older, manufacturers of hardware and software vendors must take such findings into account in their long-term development and marketing strategies, not only will it help their profit line it is a more ethical approach to information technology.

"Ensuring that our seniors are mainstream participants in the digital world is a responsibility shared by all, so that our elderly remain productive and contributing members of our society. Such an approach will improve their overall quality of life,

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as well as the world at large," the researchers conclude.

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