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ICT and the over 50s: overcoming barriers to employment and training advice

A report for the Ufi Charitable Trust

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The research

This project undertook to research the barriers, if any, that are experienced by older adults in making use of careers advice through the media of telephones, the internet and e-mail. Over the twenty years since computers have begun to play a part in career information and guidance in the UK, much has been written about the role they do and might play in work both with young people and adults. More recently, concern has been expressed about this on behalf of older users.

The immediate idea for this study followed an evaluation of the *learndirect* pilot of full careers guidance by telephone (Page, et al., 2007), which suggested that while the quality of the guidance to older adults was good, and comparable to that for adults below the age of 50, older adults were not using the service so much as younger ones. Also, although satisfaction rates overall were still high, older adults were less happy with it. Why was this so?

At the same time that this research was commissioned, *learndirect* itself was exploring how better to serve people over 50. Now the service flags its relevance to that age group on the front page of its website, which was not the case when our interviews were conducted. Ufi has developed full guidelines for advisers of the older workforce (<http://olderworkers.advice-resources.co.uk/>) and commissioned a website of resources targeted at older people themselves (www.fiftyforward.co.uk). However, this does not make our findings less relevant: if there are some older people who are uncomfortable using this medium, how can we support them?

Also at the start of this research, the Government had made the decision to develop an Advancement and Careers Service for adults in England that would draw on the best practice of existing face-to-face services and those delivered at a distance, including *learndirect* and *nextstep*. This followed recommendations from the Leitch report on skill development and a year-long review of existing adult guidance services. If a service for adults was to co-ordinate provision delivered in this range of ways, how could it best serve those people in the labour market and with a good fifteen years still ahead of them, around a third of their working life?

This study was qualitative and exploratory, and limited by available funding. But we were able to explore issues which would permit decisions to be taken about further work. We used semi-structured interviews with older users of both publicly-funded face-to-face advice and guidance, and *learndirect*. We also interviewed practitioners working with those groups. We had hoped to be able to explore the views of users and advisers at Jobcentre Plus, now making full use of internet and telephone, but protocols prevented this. However, we were able to include some older Jobcentre Plus clients on a sub-contracted programme. The scale of this study did not allow us to include the almost more significant non-users of these services, nor those who used private sector services, nor, perhaps most importantly, those who had sought advice from their employer. We come back to this in Next Steps.

Summary of findings

ICT skills generally

1. The older people in our study showed a considerable range of ability and willingness to use telephones, internet and e-mail for enquiries about learning and work. There were some who were able and willing to use these media and there was a significant group who were not able or not willing to do so, even for general everyday purposes.
2. Confidence in using these media generally did not automatically imply willingness to use them for learning and work enquiries. All those who were recruited through face-to-face services, including those who were able to use electronic media, expressed a strong preference for face-to-face help.
3. But nor was lack of confidence in internet or e-mail use for general purposes necessarily a bar to using them: some who did not regard themselves as confident users did nonetheless use them when necessary. Many older advice seekers were learning to use internet and e-mail, and many clients and advisers believed that if older people who were not currently ICT users had sufficient motivation they would not necessarily experience a problem.
4. Older people who preferred face-to-face advice were not necessarily technophobes: several said that if they were seeking information they would rather use the internet than the telephone if they could not get it face-to-face.

Telephones

5. Many of the objections to the use of telephone for advice about learning or work, on the part of our face-to-face sample, were not specifically age-related. The objections related to calls to employers about jobs, to colleges about courses, and to *learnirect*. They included:
 - worrying that they would not remember all the things they wanted to talk about
 - strong dislike of telephone menus
 - not being able to interpret the meaning or intentions of the adviser without visual clues
 - not feeling themselves to be very articulate
 - strong dislike of leaving messages on telephone answering machines
 - wanting written information for accuracy but also for accountability
 - not wanting to talk about personal matters with someone they did not know
 - not having very confident English (and having a mother tongue not included among those on the *learnirect* minority language helpline)

Some reasons were not necessarily age-related but perhaps more likely to affect some older people:

- hearing loss
- the cost of telephone calls to people on very low incomes

Learndirect careers advice

6. Marketing for *learndirect* was not reaching older people as effectively as it might. Some were aware of the television commercials but either did not know what they were about, or assumed they were for younger people. Some ignore all television advertising. Our respondents made suggestions for improving marketing to this age group (see recommendations).
7. There was a confusion between *learndirect*, the training provider, and *learndirect*, the advice service. It was not clear to some that 'learndirect' was anything to do with jobs.
8. Many clients and advisers expressed the concern that a national database could not hold the particular local information that would be needed by older users. This concern was expressed by *learndirect* advisers as well as face-to-face advisers.
9. Our *learndirect* users were happy to use the telephone because they were able to obtain help without having to make the journey to a face-to-face service (and they preferred the telephone to the internet). Many face-to-face service users agreed that this could be helpful to people who could not physically get to a service. Although nearly all still preferred face-to-face, they conceded that other advantages of a distance service might include that it could:
 - be accessible at all times (also expressed as immediacy and convenience)
 - result in discussions less likely to digress
 - provide access to a wide range of information
 - permit printing out information to think about it
 - be easier than face-to-face if you do not like the adviser
10. Most of our *learndirect* users had sought quite straightforward information and were happy with the service even when the answer was that the course they wanted was not available. Some who had sought more in-depth guidance were content to have abandoned their initial plan on the basis of the first call and to think more before phoning again. This is the kind of process associated with a good on-going guidance relationship with a face-to-face adviser.
11. While the view of some face-to-face advisers was that telephone advice would not be able to give older service users the complicated advice they needed, our discussion with *learndirect* advisers demonstrated a level of understanding and concern for older service users that was far beyond that shown by some of the face-to-face ones. This is not to say that one group is better than another, but does suggest that it is the adviser, and the professional support that they receive, that actually matters.

Collaboration between distance and face-to-face services

12. Referral between *learndirect* and *nextstep* is particularly important for this client group, and was not felt to be working well by advisers on either side. *Nextstep* providers do not rate distance advice highly enough to recommend it, and believe that *learndirect* does not refer people to *nextstep*; *learndirect* advisers are frustrated that they can only refer adults with qualifications below level 2, however out of date their higher qualifications are. This mis-match is an urgent priority for those planning the Adult Advancement and Careers Service.

Internet and e-mail

13. Advisers of older adults were in agreement that computer skills were important for confidence in achieving wider goals, and encouraged clients to acquire them. Some had IT skills courses or facilities linked to their guidance service. One service regularly took groups of older adults to explore computer facilities in the public library.
14. 'Having access to a computer', a question sometimes used to establish whether it is appropriate to direct someone to web-based resources, is not a good indicator of whether they can use them. Several of our respondents had a computer at home which was not connected to the internet; others were on-line at home but it was another family member who was the internet user; others were on-line but were very limited in their skills or liking of the internet.
15. Problems associated with internet use for those who do not have internet at home, beside any lack of skills, included:
 - difficulties of conducting searches in the specific time-slots available at public libraries
 - difficulties in assembling the necessary information for filling in on-line questionnaires or application forms away from home.
16. Problems associated with e-mail use, beside lack of skills, included wanting reliable information straight away.

Recommendations

1. Some older adults are happy to use electronic media to obtain information and guidance, and services to develop provision for older people will benefit them. Others will continue to prefer, and in some cases need, face-to-face services.
 - adult careers provision should continue to include a face-to-face service, and ensure that it meets the needs of older adults.
2. Many older people are concerned that staff may not appreciate their particular constraints or attitudes. Some older people do prefer an adviser of their own age, and this may even be true of some *learndirect* users.
 - Training on the issues concerning older people should form a regular part of professional development for staff in all services, face-to-face or distance
 - A service that is to attract older users should have at least some older advisers.
 - An all-age service should consider developing specialist staff with a brief to maintain the expertise of colleagues in work with older adults
3. Marketing of *learndirect* careers advice should make certain messages absolutely clear: that it is free, that it is about work as well as learning, that it is not only to do with computers, that it encourages older users. Our respondents suggested that as well as *unambiguous* television advertisements, other ways might reach more older adults. They suggested local newspapers; notices in libraries and on other notice boards in places they tended to go such as coffee shops, residential centres or Jobcentre Plus; and letters or leaflets through the door.
4. If it is to help those without internet and e-mail skills or access, *learndirect* must go back to offering paper-based back-up materials.
5. If they are to help older adults, *learndirect* and *nextstep* must improve referral arrangements between them.

On the part of *nextstep*, this will require:

- a systematic and thorough training programme for advisers on what the *learndirect* careers advice service now is and how to make best use of it and its supporting materials
- changes to the funding criteria which currently exclude people above level 2, even when these qualifications are old and unusable.

On the part of *learndirect*, this will require:

- thorough training for advisers on the nature of the detailed information that local services can provide, that cannot be held on national databases, and which is important for older users.
6. Face-to-face advisers as well as *learndirect* ones would benefit from the training suggested by the *learndirect* advisers in this study, namely for:

- Working with older people
 - Labour market information that relates to the over 50s
 - Identifying transferable skills
 - Funding options with eligibility criteria for 50+ age group
 - More detailed information on Jobcentre Plus programmes such as New Deal, to include case studies as to who is eligible and how they apply
 - Working on 'solution focused' approaches
 - The impact of the age discrimination regulations
 - Financial advice and referral.
7. Face-to-face services should offer support to all their users, whether or not over 50, in the use of telephones and computer applications, through staff that are trained, friendly and sympathetic to the needs of its target groups. These can be volunteers so long as they are trained and supported in turn. Checking that a client 'has access to a computer' is not enough to ensure that they can use ICT.
8. In planning an Adult Advancement and Careers Service that brings publicly-funded advice into a coherent single system, work on the part played by ICT in Jobcentre Plus services, and the extent to which it may disadvantage people of any age who are not confident in these media, is urgently needed. This group may contain a disproportionate number of older people.

Background

As with all specific user groups of any service, there is a danger of generalising about people over 50 who are seeking career guidance.

- i. Individuals vary greatly in their:
 - qualifications
 - work experience
 - family situations
 - where they live
 - current employment status
 - occupational sector.
- ii. At a social level people have different expectations depending on their culture and social backgrounds.
- iii. Individuals have different retirement preferences and plans, and age physically and mentally at different rates.
- iv. No individual is defined permanently by any of these factors: as individuals they may change, and successive cohorts of people may change. The 50+ age group now includes generations which have themselves, if not grown up with computers, at least used them at work or with their own children. Over the next ten years people who did grow up with computers will be moving into their 40s.
- v. Individuals' interest and confidence in the use of computers also varies. Some are 'silver surfers', particularly adept in using the internet for some purposes at least (see for example the on-line networking website www.saga.co.uk/magazine/lifechanges/planretirement/Saga-Scenesters.asp). Some 'luddites' are distressed by, and hostile to computers and all their works. Many are in between: perhaps nervous, perhaps happy with some uses and not others, perhaps currently ignorant but willing and able to learn, perhaps actually learning.
- vi. Many people over 50 do not want careers or learning advice, by ICT or face-to-face, either because after serious reflection they do not want to make any changes to their lives, or because they have found what they need quite easily without it. We cannot assume that any difference between the use of services by this age group and use by younger age groups is a measure of how much ground could or should be made up by over 50s. However, again this is not fixed. An individual who does not want help at 50 may do so at 67.

In thirty years time, while there will still be people who are luddites by culture, experience or preference, the age factor *per se* may be less significant. However, there will still be people who experience the combined disadvantage of being older in the labour market and lacking in confidence in computer technologies. The overall issues in this research will have continued relevance.

This project began from a study of existing research. There is a growing literature on the guidance needs of older adults, a separate and different kind of growing literature on the use made by older adults of information and communication technology, and a literature on the development and effectiveness of ICT-mediated guidance. There is not so much in the area of overlap of these, which is where our project falls.

The current best published synthesis of general research and provision on the guidance needs of older people is still Ford's *Am I Still Needed?* (Ford, 2005). It was updated in 'The Impact of an Ageing Population on Career Guidance' (Ford, *et al*, 2006), a paper prepared for the 2005-2007 Government review of adult IAG in England but not yet published.

We conducted a literature review (presented as a separate document) to consider what is already known about this topic and how others had explored it. On the basis of that we drew up the list of questions we wanted to explore with our sample of users and practitioners. Some of this research is cited in the relevant section of this report.

Methodology

Careers advice for older adults

People over 50 are of course eligible to use guidance services for adults if they meet any other criteria laid down in the funding of those services. For example, those who are qualified over level 2 are not typically eligible for free help under *nextstep* funding. However, some agencies that deliver *nextstep* services receive funding also from other sources which may enable them to see people with higher qualifications. Although the client may know they are using a *nextstep* service they may not be aware of the particular funding stream that is paying for their help.

LearnDirect Careers Advice provides a telephone advice line which offers information and advice, and now fuller career coaching, for all adults regardless of qualification level, although some of its services are restricted to those below level 3. Many people are unaware of any guidance services for adults, and believe Jobcentre Plus to provide the only help.

Some services that operate *nextstep* provision receive additional funding for work with older adults. In a few areas there are specialist careers services for older adults, often run by Age Concern or other age-related voluntary organisations, and in other cases free-standing services. In many cases funding for such services is temporary, and some areas which had specialist guidance services for older adults until recently no longer do so.

The sample

We interviewed 55 service users over the age of 50, individually or in small groups. We visited services in the north of England (Tyneside and Manchester), in the southwest (Devon, Cornwall and Somerset), and in Hertfordshire. Our sample included people who lived in big cities, smaller towns and in the country. Ten of our sample were users of the *learnDirect* telephone service, who were spread geographically from the southeast to the northwest. Our sample included people in socio-economic categories 1 to 7 on the National Statistics 8-point scale and their ages ranged from 50 to 75. The face-to-face service-users included some who had been seen by services that catered for all ages, and some who had visited services that specialise in work with older adults.

The largest category of our sample, because of the way they were recruited, were understandably unemployed and seeking work (26), and 7 were fully 'retired' (not necessarily willingly), but all had at some point recently sought advice on learning, volunteering or other forms of participation if not actual paid employment (table 1).

These main employment categories mask a range of features of people in this age group that are particularly relevant to their learning and work interests. For example, 12, spread across the main categories, were also volunteering (one of the part-time workers, 6 of the retired people, one of the recently redundant, one of those on sick leave, and three of those unemployed and seeking work). One of the self-employed people was registered disabled. One of the retired people had done so early for health reasons and two, over state pension age, had not wanted to retire but had been made to do so by their employers. Five in the unemployed and seeking work category were trying to do what the government is urging, to come off disability-

related benefits and return to the labour market: three of these were currently on Incapacity Benefit and another had recently come off it, and another was receiving Disability Living Allowance.

Table 1 Occupational status, whole sample

Occupational Status	Nos
UE, seeking work (one retraining at the same time)	26
Full time employed	2
Part time employed (one of these is self-employed)	9
Self employed (does not include the part-time person)	3
Retired	7
Recently made redundant, not currently seeking work	2
On sick leave	2
UE, retraining and not currently seeking work	2
UE, on Incapacity Benefit and not currently seeking work	1
On Income Support, acting as a carer	1
Total	55

Status of our findings

In this report we quote the numbers who took a particular view to give a sense of how widely it was held in our very heterogeneous sample. Our sample was too small and unbalanced to allow us to draw conclusions from the views even of those groups that we did interview. But we were able to explore a *range* of views by covering the different kinds of people who would use the publicly-funded face-to-face services such as *nextstep*, Jobcentre Plus services, and specialist career advice services for older adults, on the one hand, and people who used the national telephone advice line, *learnirect* on the other. Their situations are typical of others who would benefit from such advice but do not know where to look for it. Much of the help available is only accessed through telephone or web-based services, including that provided by Jobcentre Plus even in their own centres.

If resources had allowed it would have been preferable to record interviews and analyse them with appropriate software. However, within the limitations of our material we have been as rigorous as we can. Much rich data was collected, and while further research will certainly reveal additional important policy-related insights, these results show that there are groups of people out there who think like this.

Advisers

We conducted interviews with advisers who worked in the centres from which we had recruited respondents. In all we were able to interview two advisers in different services in the north, two in the southwest, and two in Hertfordshire. Four of these were conducted face-to-face at the time of the interviews with their clients and one was conducted by telephone afterwards. We also conducted a group interview with six *learnirect* staff: three of these were advisers and three were career coaches.

The regional groups

The regions were chosen to try to explore differences between people who lived in large cities, small towns, and in the country, and also a mix of people who lived in the north and south of the country. We also wanted to explore whether there were any differences between people living in areas where the employment options were shaped by a rural or manufacturing economy in decline, and a more buoyant economy where there were better chances for unemployed people to find work quickly after redundancy or another setback.

Inevitably, given the small size of the samples and the timescale for recruiting respondents, the actual group of individuals who took part did not permit us to achieve all these comparisons, but we did end up with three groups with interesting differences. These were possibly shaped more by the type of agency with which we were able to arrange interviews than the regional differences for which we were aiming. However, it gave us a total sample with a good spread on all our dimensions, and three groups with interesting socio-economic differences.

Southwest sample

We interviewed two groups of users of generalist adult advice services run by *nextstep* in Torquay, and one user of a specialist third-age guidance service in Swindon. We were just too late to draw respondents from a three-year initiative, South West Opportunities for Older People (www.swoop-project.org.uk which ended in the summer of 2007, but we benefited from discussions with their staff. We were unable to speak directly to users of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) but we were able to interview two groups of JCP clients who had been referred to job-search activities run by the independent provider A4E in Exeter. In all we spoke to 19 service users in the south west.

Just over half of these had worked mostly in occupations in the bottom half of the National Statistics 2001 socio-economic classification (SEC) scale, and the rest were divided about equally between managerial and professional occupations ('higher' and 'lower', 1-2) and groups (3-4) which include office administration jobs together with 'small employers and own account workers'.

About two thirds of the southwest sample were not currently in any paid work. They were predominantly in their 50s, with only 2 who were sixty or over, and nearly three quarters were male. We had expected to draw more rural people from this area, but in fact only three, just under a sixth, of this group lived in the country.

Hertfordshire sample

We were able to contact three people who were receiving redundancy advice based in their own company but organised by a *nextstep* provider, three people from a specialist programme for older adults provided by a *nextstep* service, and five who were attending a mainstream *nextstep* service. In all we spoke to 11 service users in Hertfordshire. Their distribution between the SEC groups was more U-shaped, with more from managerial or professional backgrounds than in our southwest group.

Only just over one-fifth of this group were in any kind of work. This group was fairly evenly distributed between 50 and 70, and about three quarters of them were male. Just over a quarter of this group lived in the country.

Northern sample

We spoke with four people who were referred to us by *nextstep* in Sale, and three more by *nextstep* in Stockport. We also talked to eight people whom we contacted through a specialist service for older adults run by Age Concern in Tyneside. This gave us a total of 15 service users in the north. About half of this group had backgrounds in the middle SEC groups 3-4, so the sample was more the shape of a 'normal' curve.

Only about one eighth of this group was in any kind of work and it was towards the younger end of the spectrum: about two thirds were in their 50s, with one third in their sixties, and about three quarters of them were female. Two of this group, a very small proportion, lived in the country.

Learndirect sample

We spoke to ten people who had approached *learndirect* for information or advice. These interviews were conducted by telephone. This group was more evenly distributed between the SEC groups, and just over one third were in some kind of employment. 6 were female and 4 male. 5 lived in large cities, one in a small town, and four in the country. Four were over 60, and two of these over 70: the rest were between 50 and 59.

The two oldest lived in the northwest of England, the two youngest in outer London boroughs. Overall we had three from the northwest, two from the northeast, two from Yorkshire, two from London and one from East Anglia.

What did we ask?

With the service users we explored the way they felt about each of the three communication media, telephone, internet and e-mail. Because we knew from previous research that there was variation in how confident people were using these communication media at all, we asked first how comfortable they were using it for other everyday tasks, and then if they used it for enquiries about learning and work. If they had, we asked how they got on. If not, we asked if they would consider it.

In the case of the telephone and the computer, we also split our questions about their use into two, firstly for getting simple information and then for using them as a medium for more in-depth interaction. Earlier research suggested that some people might have reservations about using it for the second even if they were comfortable using it for the first.

We then separately asked their advice on how people in their age group would like help with their learning and work decisions, and sought their opinion on how best to tell them and their friends about such a service.

To be absolutely sure we had not missed any views, we also asked if they thought older people generally were uncomfortable with these media.

45 of the interviews were conducted face-to-face by a team of three experienced researchers, using an open-ended interview schedule. The interviews with the *learndirect* users were conducted by telephone, again by an experienced researcher, using a similar but slightly adapted interview schedule. Responses were sometimes but not generally captured verbatim, and quotations are from the interviewers' notes.

With the advisers, we asked them their views on how comfortable their older clients were in using these media, and if they had any advice on how to support them in that use, and how to encourage them to use it. We also asked their views on how the new Adult Advancement and Careers Service could integrate these different media.

Findings 1. Use of telephones

How comfortable are people in using the telephone at all? Can we assume that people, whether or not they are over 50, do all use this increasingly prevalent way to obtain information?

We asked the 45 people whom we had contacted through face-to-face services whether they used the phone to get simple information about anything, such as train times, cinema programmes or asking about holidays. Twelve people (more than a quarter) said no, and a further 17 did use it, but reluctantly. This dislike of the phone by our face-to-face sample is not necessarily due to difficulties with modern technology: unprompted, eight people said that they preferred using the internet now to using the phone (though one person said they had to resort to the phone when they couldn't get through by internet).

In relation to these simple information questions, they mentioned a range of problems:

- communication problems compared with face-to-face (18 mentions)
- expense as serious deterrent (8)
- heartfelt dislike of menus (5)
- hearing problems (3)
- lack of confidence in use of English (first language Spanish) (1)

Exploring more about the 17 who were willing to use the phone but preferred face-to-face, in many cases this was for practical reasons. One person who suffers from hearing loss said 'You can read into a face what you can't hear on the phone.' Understandably this person prefers information on paper, and for example keeps a rail timetable at home. Other comments:

'Eye contact etc means you know they are listening to you or not.'
 'You know if you are getting 'right' answers from the body language. On the phone - do they listen to you? No'

Of those who said they didn't use the phone for information, there was an issue for some about lack of confidence. One expressed it:

'[My] partner usually does this. She's better on the phone.'

But there was also something about a phone call which panicked some people:

'[Face-to-face you are] able to 'think around' and ask more questions.'
 '[I] get tongue-tied - forget what [I] was going to say.'
 'If phone, you need to be better prepared. Face to face you can explain issues.'

One person said she was afraid she'd be 'fobbed off' on the phone. And one person said it was more *interesting* talking with a human being (face-to-face).

But a third of our face-to-face sample said they were happy to use the phone for information, and unsurprisingly all ten people in the *learndirect*-using sample were habitual telephone users.

There was no single answer. There is a group of older people who are not phased by having to use the phone to get information; another group who simply will not do so; and a significant group who have strong reasons for resisting using it if they possibly can.

Some of these reasons are age-related in that they stem from disabilities that are more likely to advance with age such as hearing loss. Some are not age-related but apply to older people as well as others, such as cost and language difficulties. Financial considerations are more likely to influence people on small fixed incomes. On the basis of this group of questions, there is a clear need for sources of information other than by telephone for the general population, and particularly for this age group.

Telephones for fuller discussions

Only three people in the face-to-face sample, all selected because they had recently contacted a service with questions about employment or training, said that they had used the phone to discuss jobs or training (and one of those then went in for a face-to-face interview).

We wondered if perhaps these were people who did not like to use the telephone for chatting generally. This did not seem to be the case. 34 of the face-to-face 45 said they *did* use the telephone for in-depth conversations with family or friends, and a further 3 said they did not like doing it but they did when necessary. Although numbers are much too small to make any generalisations, our (mainly female) respondents in the north of England were particularly happy to chat on the phone. This fits with European research which noted that 'while men dominate the use of the newer ICTs, it seems that women have made the older forms of ICT into their own (Haisken-DeNew, 2004:30)

So if they used the phone for chatting to friends, had our respondents ever used it for talking in-depth to someone they did not know (such a nurse on NHS Direct)? Of the 34 people who do use the phone for chatting to friends, only 6 had used it to obtain advice from a stranger. Of the 8 people who do not use the phone for chatting even to friends, 7 said they definitely would not use it to get advice from a stranger.

(M, 63) Definitely not for in-depth discussion. 'In my opinion it should be done face-to-face. Might be considered old fashioned, but actually it's the right way to do things, in my opinion.'

(F, 50) Would use any other option first

All ten of the *learndirect*-using sample said they did use the phone to chat to friends. Most said they had no problem talking in-depth to strangers, and the only one who expressed any reservations about that said 'if necessary' and did not show any shyness in the telephone interview conducted for this survey.

These answers show a range of preferences in the use of the phone. One group of people will not use the phone even to talk to people they know well. Even among those who do use the phone in that way, there are many who are reluctant to talk

about themselves to strangers on the phone. However, there is also a group who do confidently use the phone in this way.

Telephones for advice about employment or learning

Watts and Dent (2002), writing about the early days of the *learndirect* advice line, attribute the rise in use of helplines generally to a range of factors including the increase in sheer numbers of telephones (including mobiles) in use, and a rise in consumerism which leads people to want services 'here' and 'now'. They include among its disadvantages:

- lack of visual cues
- the linked problem of 'differentiated environmental distractions'.

Our face-to-face sample generally supported the first. The three 'face-to-face' respondents who had used the phone for information about learning or work were all in the north west and only two of these calls had been to *learndirect*: the others had been to phone the local *nextstep* service, who then got them in for a face-to-face interview.

So we asked those who had not used one if they would consider phoning an advice line. Only 7 of the 42 said they would, all people who were confident phone users (although interestingly they were all people who had earlier told us they were not happy about calling people they did not know). Another 17 said they might, but only if there was no other way as they strongly preferred face-to-face or other media. The rest, 18, said they would not. This is not a matter of feeling nervous about communicating if you can't see someone's face. Ten of the people who said they would definitely not want to use an advice line were confident phone users.

To explore the origins of the reluctance felt by some, we asked what they thought about the assertion 'that older people would rather talk face-to-face with someone than speak on the phone about work, courses or retirement planning.' The predominate response (25 out of 32) was a definite, unqualified yes. Two enlarged in relation to age ('It's the way we grew up') but many others saw it as a matter of individual preference ('Yes probably true, but of all age groups'). Other comments in favour of face-to-face:

- 'More fun anyway when you are talking to people'
- 'Gives chance to check/make notes. Memory etc
- 'It's a quite different reaction and feeling. Feels better, and seems honest (or you can see through it)'

Five conceded there might be times when the phone could have its uses ('People like both depending on circumstances'; further examples on page 35) . Two said that they themselves would be willing to use the phone, but thought most would not. No-one disagreed with the overall assertion.

This data suggests some older people at least are confident users of telephone and other electronic media. However, many older people (and perhaps younger people) prefer face-to-face interactions to ones where they cannot see an adviser. If it must be electronic, some prefer to get information from written electronic sources rather than oral/aural electronic ones.

Advisers' views on telephones as a medium

Two of our face-to-face advisers also had experience of working through the medium of the telephone. One was involved in a local outreach project in which she was given the number of people who could not come to the centre and would be willing to be phoned at home. They valued it in principle, she said, but the response had been varied, and she believed older people were more wary. She had found it was important to 'listen, and not sell'. 'Very few are uncomfortable as long as they are fully reassured there's no hidden agenda.' For her, it was not so much a matter of the medium as of the adviser: 'It's as good as the person delivering'.

The other described problems with the telephone service but not with the use of it by older clients, though he did think older people were not so comfortable using the phone for more in-depth discussions. He thought the best way to incorporate the phone is to use it to talk at a general level, but send any information in the post and also encourage people to come in for a face-to-face session. He felt that it might be harder for older people to deal with drastic changes in their lives, such as loss of a job, and they needed more personal support to address the associated problems.

Another adviser echoed the reservations of some of our respondents, saying that her older clients had a profound dislike for automated answering systems and particularly telephone menus. She thought many were happy to talk to a live person on the phone, but she had heard many complaints about the system at Jobcentre Plus where clients are given a phone number and told to contact an employer themselves. Many of her older clients had hearing problems and that for those whose only phone was a mobile, it was particularly difficult to conduct important, personal business by phone. 'It's fine if you know what you're asking for' but many clients' needs are for more than just careers guidance, and people are not necessarily happy to discuss these by phone. Besides, she said, 'thoughts can be sparked off by seeing information around them, and other people' (perhaps a different aspect to Watts and Dent's point about 'differentiated environmental distractions').

She raised a point that was explored in the evaluation of the *learnirect* guidance trial (Page, et al, 2007), whether the national database could include enough local knowledge. She felt this was particularly important for older clients. This was echoed by another *nextstep* adviser who said she generally did speak to clients on the phone first, but in advance of a face-to-face session, so it was part of building a personal relationship. She thought that a national database could not carry enough detail relevant, for example, to physical access. She did not think older adults would have a problem using it, 'but the problem is, how useful would it be to them?'

Our adviser who was working with Jobcentre Plus referees, on the basis of her experience believed that older clients *would* be particularly deterred from using a telephone service. But it is possible that she did not see the more pro-active side of her clients as they were attending a benefits-related obligatory jobsearch centre: 'they are sent and they arrive'.

Ford (2005: 3.58-3.62) is sceptical about the ability of distance guidance to:

- change ingrained attitudes towards learning and work
- restore self-esteem
- instil motivation
- help individuals to relate opportunities to their own personal circumstances.

But Madahar and Offer (2004) believe this concern is unfounded, on the grounds that the medium is used in therapeutic and crisis counselling.

Only three of our *learndirect* sample's enquiries were for anything more complicated than just information about an affordable course near them, so it is perhaps not surprising that all ten were happy with a telephone service. But some older people see no problem in seeking in-depth advice from strangers by phone. Our *learndirect* advisers gave us examples of some of the questions that they had been asked by older users which echoed the full range described by Ford (2005) or Collins (2006):

- calls from people aged 50-60 who have 15 years left before finishing work or retirement and feel there is still time to make a change
- have been made redundant and feel that their age is against them in getting another job
- had a manual job that they cannot manage any more – getting older and looking for possible alternatives
- done a trade/skill all their lives but have no formal qualifications. Need something to prove they can do what they do. Want a qualification
- looking for a job with training so they can learn something new
- looking for a computer course for their age group – not full of youngsters.

They felt it was a challenging group to work with, but they did feel they were able to meet their needs as much as was reasonably possible, and their discussion indicated that this was based on a detailed and sympathetic understanding at least of their clients' difficulties. Their understanding was comparable with that of the most experienced face-to-face staff. However, they did say that problems of older callers included:

- lack of confidence
- an 'emotional state' that influenced their ability to maintain motivation and pursue options
- an inability for some to handle change

which might suggest that sensitive and efficient referral to a face-to-face service could help. When asked about such referral the response of these *learndirect* advisers expressed reservations about Jobcentre Plus. They said they did refer to local *nextstep* services, when clients were below level 2 and eligible, but many of the 50+ group are over level 2 and even where they might not have a formal level qualification many are not interested in doing a 'first level 2' qualification.

They also mentioned as difficulties in working with older clients, their own lack of detailed knowledge about local opportunities for either learning or work, and also:

- the complex entitlements for this age group (for example around New Deal)
- the need for a particular focus on transferable skills.

This should not be taken to mean that all face-to-face services do have these capabilities (in fact we know from other research, such as DfES, 2003 that most do not). But it does suggest the need for greater collaboration between national distance and local face-to-face services and the will to build up centres that specialise in help for older users to which all generalist services can refer.

We were struck by the great advantage that the *learndirect* advisers had over their face-to-face counterparts in that they were a large enough group working in one

place to be able to discuss and share their understanding with professional colleagues. Our face-to-face advisers who specialised in work with older clients were generally working on their own.

Findings 2: The learndirect advice line

The two from our northern face-to-face sample who had also used *learndirect* had found it helpful. One said they paid attention to her request and gave appropriate information. But even so, another was not to be converted:

F (58) Very good ... Service was not patronising. [Respondent] was impressed but would still prefer face-to-face. 'There's better interaction - people can ask you about your circumstances.' She has a good relationship with the Jobcentre Plus adviser and *nextstep* adviser also.

In contrast to the largely negative attitude to telephone advice from the face-to-face sample, the ten in the *learndirect* sample were all pleased with the help they had received.

M (75) Very good, very impressed. Got part-time evening class and was due to attend his third class the next day.

Watts and Dent (2002) suggest that the advantage of helplines include:

- accessibility
- flexibility
- anonymity
- greater equality (users are on their own territory and can terminate the call when they wish)
- possibly more focused and purposeful interaction.

None of our *learndirect* users mentioned anonymity or equality, but the other advantages came up in one form or another. Importantly, they were able to separate their judgement of the information or advice they had received from the outcome of their search, which through no fault of the advisers was not always successful:

F (50) Was happy with the service as she received it. Was pleased she could do it all over the phone. Adviser was helpful but all she could find was what the respondent had already found through her own searches – three years full-time in London.

F (58) Was given a lot of information but hasn't actually found another course yet. Felt the information was okay but her situation is complicated by the fact that she is on Jobseekers Allowance: she has to apply for four jobs a fortnight and can only do a part-time course as she has to be available for work.

M (60) Good response. Advisers tried hard and gave lots of leads, but couldn't get what he wanted.

One captured the point that the advice can be good in that it helps you think things through which may lead to a (constructive) change of mind, a feature of the best face-to-face guidance:

F (52) Only had one intervention so far but thought the advice and service were excellent. The adviser gave her ideas and various leads to follow – a feeler as to what her options were. She has done a bit of research since then and has now changed her mind Will phone again when she is ready.

Keen on the idea of regular contact on demand – to be able to ring when she has finished ‘mulling things over’.

Another got what she wanted at the time, though on reflection she felt it could have been a bit more:

F (53) ‘...she just wanted to ring someone – didn’t feel very confident about her position.’ ‘She thought the service was very good – they were very positive and helpful, although on reflection she feels maybe they should have asked a few more questions.’

By contrast with the face-to-face sample who compared the phone negatively with a face-to-face service, the *learndirect* sample, all between the ages of 50 and 75, bore out Watts and Dent in that they were happy that they could do all this by phone, and did not ‘have to’ go into a service to see someone face-to-face.

It is worth noting that the *learndirect* group stressed that they would rather use the phone than the internet (eight of our face-to-face sample had stated the opposite preference). Even the six *learndirect* users who were reasonably confident internet and e-mail users said they would want to check out information got through those media over the phone. As two of our advisers said, ‘It’s horses for courses’.

What would make learndirect advice more attractive to older people?

We asked if our face-to-face group would be more likely to use a telephone advice service if it was specially tailored to older people. A quarter said no, and another quarter were either unsure or said maybe. But half said they would and there were similar results in relation to an information line:

M (63) ‘Might be more interested just to see how it's balanced. Possibly good. You'll know there'll be a certain amount of sympathetic conversation - more idea of needs. More aware of pitfalls.’

M (65) ‘Yes, and especially if run by Age Concern or Help the Aged’.

One person regarded Myguide as a good example (www.myguide.gov.uk) of a web resource with layout and screen style attractive to older users. A number of people mentioned the difficulty of not being able to understand the accents of call centre staff, usually seeing the problem to be that they did not want to be rude to keep asking the person what they meant. But one person experienced it as a health risk. He had a blood pressure problem and the frustration of not being able to understand an accent had alarmed him so much that he had had to hang up.

We asked what they would like to see. In fact all of the ways that were suggested are actually part of the existing *learndirect* service. As only two of the face-to-face sample had actually used *learndirect*, these comments may reflect bad experiences with call centres, such as their widespread dislike of answer machines (including one about unclear recordings) and phone menus, or a bad experience on the part of someone whom they knew (which might happen with any service). Or it might reflect a preconception that a telephone service could never be good. For example, one person said that *learndirect* was not sufficiently adaptable, which does not accord with Page et al’s evaluation (2007).

Similarly, there were many who were worried about the cost and said they would be more likely to use it if it were free (including one who mentioned he was on £59 per

week) or if advisers offered to return calls; and others mentioned the financial implication of long waiting times. But calls to *learndirect* are in fact free from landlines, and callers can request a call back (or ask via the website for an adviser to call them) which is free to landline or mobile. So there is perhaps a need to explore how to help people who only have access to a mobile phone to get access to a landline, there is also a problem about much clearer marketing.

Other suggestions might again reflect their lack of actual experience of *learndirect*, but are still worth noting that they are important to older people:

- A friendly manner and nice tone of voice, and to show they are really listening.
- Need to be supportive of less confident people.
- Better, simpler language.

And to underline the point that older people who do not like phone lines are not necessarily technophobes, one 58-year-old said he 'might be interested in video phone - might feel more personal.'

The *learndirect* advisers had a number of suggestions for their own training that would enable them to give a better service to older users.

- Working with older people
- Labour market information that relates to the over 50s
- Identifying transferable skills
- Funding options with eligibility criteria for 50+ age group
- More detailed information on Jobcentre Plus programmes such as New Deal, to include case studies as to who is eligible and how they apply
- Working on 'solution focused' approaches
- The impact of the age discrimination regulations
- Financial advice and referral

They also mentioned the need for specialist advisers working with those adults who want to retire, or explore a different work/life balance, and the importance of returning to the option of paper-based materials.

Awareness of the *learndirect* advice line

We asked the face-to-face service users if they were aware that advice about courses, jobs and thinking about retirement is actually available now by phone and e-mail and through the internet. The answers were a little ambiguous, because although 13 said 'yes' it is not clear what it was they were aware of, as two other people said 'yes' and then clarified it to show that they meant something other than *learndirect* advice: 'Yes, A4e'; 'Agencies, pension people, consultants' (this person later said they were 'aware of *learndirect* phone/web but not interested in using it so far'). And another person said no, but they did know that you could access JCP Jobpoints from home.

So although this was somewhat inconclusive, it did raise a more useful point. The 'gremlins' advertisement had had good exposure, and *learndirect* claims 82 per cent public awareness. But only two people in our face-to-face group (fewer than 5 per cent) had been clear about *what* it was advertising, and one of these said: 'Aware of 'gremlins' but didn't want to phone'. One person said they had seen the TV advertisements 'but it is for younger people'. One reflected confusion about the use

of 'learndirect' for the advice line as well as computer skill development: 'The TV ads appear to be advertising computer related jobs only, or that is his perception'

Another said they had seen the gremlins adverts but not really noticed, 'probably because it was a phone service'. Two others had an idea at the back of their minds that there was something like that, but could not be more definite. One was 'slightly hesitant, feels she might have been aware but not related it to herself.'

Twenty three of our 45 people who one way or another had got questions in their minds about learning or work and were motivated enough to seek out a face-to-face service said they did not know a helpline service existed. We might have expected them to be the ones most likely to pick up the publicity (and in fact later when we asked them how they had heard about it, the few who answered mostly mentioned the TV advertisements).

It does suggest however that their face-to-face services are not telling them about the distance options. There were only two exceptions to that. One person said that as well as the television they had heard about it from the library, the press and Jobcentre Plus. Another said they had been introduced to *learndirect* while they were on a trade union course.

Two of the *learndirect* sample said they had heard about it from the television advertisements, and it may have been true of another three who did not say. One other, who had been aware of it through TV, actually contacted *learndirect* on the advice of a Jobcentre Plus adviser, and another said this is how they knew about the service. One had found it through a friend's recommendation, and one had been directed to it after a chain of other referrals had not produced an answer to his enquiry. One person said her husband had told her about it, perhaps alerted by the television on her behalf. One (aged 59) had found the telephone service through an internet search, again challenging the idea that older adults are not ICT literate.

The conclusion is that brand awareness is not necessarily a good measure of understanding about what a service actually offers. The strongest marketing, as is well known, is from trusted human contacts, a fact which can be put to good use in advertising with the use of specific, well-known faces and which learndirect is now pursuing with the use of Anneka Rice's endorsement.

How *should* a telephone service be marketed to older people?

The recent New Zealand review of research into guidance for older adults (2006, Stage1:16) concludes that the economically inactive need to be reached through shopping malls, leisure centres, public libraries, citizen advice centres and community centres, and possibly also health centres through GPs.

Our question, 'What would be a good way to get the message out to you and your friends that it is there?' led to some good suggestions, firstly to improve the television advertisements:

- Put older 'real' people in the ads
- 'Never too old to learn' might catch attention
- Need to emphasise opportunities
- Suggested putting on slots in or adjacent to local/regional news programme, especially if [they] use the regional broadcasters who everyone 'knows'

A few people thought the television should differentiate between government advertisements like those for the TV licence or road safety, and ones that promote commercial products, as they might be more likely to attend to the former. Two said they:

felt that people view government ads differently/more seriously. Both were aware of gremlins ad, but don't pay much attention to advertisements - don't assume them to have personal relevance.

But others did not agree that they were more likely to look at government sponsored advertisements. More generally some felt antipathy to all advertising on television: 'TV adverts switch you off'. One person said she noticed sponsorship advertisements more than ordinary ones 'but mainly because it alerts you that the programme is about to restart.'

One person said 'Does not think TV is good idea. Many people do not have one'. And given the mixed feelings expressed by many who did have them about advertising, the suggestions for using other media, very much along the lines recommended in New Zealand, may be particularly pertinent:

- Libraries [mentioned by six people]
- Local newspapers [mentioned by six people]
- Coffee shops, bulletin boards
- Good to tell people by letter. It gives thinking time. TV adverts too ephemeral
- Maybe posters - street advertising.
- Make best use of Google to advertise.
- Post, or phone
- In written form including e-mail
- Flyers through the door. Thinks TV could be effective, but not sure how to make it personal to people.
- Advertise in Jobcentre Plus and do more in residential/sheltered housing

Many issues surrounding these were neatly summarised in a reported discussion between three respondents in the northern group:

Discussion about local newspapers (generally in favour of this) and leaflet drops (but agreed that they look at some, but some go straight in the bin). (F, 50) notices billboards, but (M, 53) thought people did not much look at these at all. Both use local libraries and agreed that they tended to look at the information displays there. Mixed views on TV advertising. (F, 66) not – tends to make tea, turn down volume etc.

Once again many people emphasised the importance of word of mouth. Demonstrating the point, one person said that now the interviewer had explained what the gremlins advertisement was about, they could think about using the service.

Some of our face-to-face respondents did feel this was an age issue. One person commented on how difficult it was to influence older people, even when it was to make them aware of helping services:

'At our age we're shut down about things. That's the worst thing about us! Old habits...'

'Older people grew up expecting to use JCP so would not expect to use distance service'

Another reflected on the difficulty of reaching those who really needed the help as another instance of:

'the difficulty of making people aware of entitlements. 'Better off' people use these things, such as bus passes, but poorer people may not be aware.'

Others made more radical suggestions, as changing the name of the service:

'Change name - incorporate "jobs"
'[Include a] separate line for over 50s'.

This study was conducted before learndirect began targeting older adults. However, this feedback and these suggestions carry weight still, and could be of real value in reviewing marketing plans. They should not rely on television to get the message to older people, and consider the other local approaches suggested.

'Now you know about it, do you think you might try it?'

Seven of the 23 face-to-face sample who had not known about it said they *might*, three said *probably* not. Ten said a very definite no. But five people said they would. Two of these actually took the phone number from their interviewer (though another expressed the concern that a national service would not have 'on the ground' information and they'd still be happier with a local telephone service). Later in the interview, one said: 'Much more likely to use helpline if it always reaches a human being.'

Findings 3: Use of the internet

Background. A 2007 Government report (National Statistics, 2007) shows that access to the internet in Great Britain is increasing rapidly and that by April 2006 57 per cent of households could access it from home, an increase of 26 per cent over the 2002 figure. This same report shows, as we would expect, that internet use varies by age, but it is how that breaks down that is interesting. Of people who had used it in the last three months, people between 45 and 54 have quite a similar profile to 25 – 44 year olds in terms of the proportion that use it almost every day, those who use it once a week, once a month, or less than once a month. Everyday use does fall away between the 45-54 group and the 55-64 group (62 per cent dwindles to 49 per cent) but at 65+ that figure is still 43 per cent (though the proportion who use it less than once a month doubles for that oldest age group).

Becta conducted a literature review in 2002 on whether age was an issue in relation to teachers acquiring ICT skills, and explored literature on whether decline of cognitive powers with age was significant. They found some decline for people over 60, but said that for individuals factors other than age were more significant (such as pressure on time and access to resources both in and out of the classroom) (Becta, 2002:3). Our findings supported a study from over ten years ago, that 'perceived usefulness is the dominant factor ..., 50 per cent more influential than ease of use' (Selwyn, 1997).

A 2006 Ofcom survey suggests that while only 21% of adults aged 65 and older have access to the internet at home compared with 54% of all UK adults, the time they spend on those home computers is roughly comparable to the time spent by younger adults, just over 6 hours per week (there is an overall difference but this is because younger adults are more likely to use the computer outside the home).

'Nearly three-quarters of older people say they are confident about e-mailing friends and relatives, and over half that they can visit websites to find out the latest news. Apart from these two areas, other elements of internet use can be done with confidence by a minority of those aged 65 and over.' (Ofcom, 2006:30)

Felstead *et al* (2007:96), too, found that the gap between older workers and others is declining. People over 55 still use 'advanced' ICT applications at work less than people aged 25-44, but between 2000 and 2006, the over 55s increased their use by 12 percentage points.

Our findings. First we consider the responses of the 45 people we talked to face to face, all selected because they had recently contacted a service with questions about employment or training. Only 28 had the internet at home.

New Zealand data (2006, Stage 1:13) show that internet access decreases with age and that having access to it does not necessarily mean that people have the skills to use it effectively. At least five of our 45 who said they had *computers* at home also told us they were not connected to the internet. It is possible that this was true of a few others where the distinction was not made in the interview. We also found that ownership *per se* is not an indication of skill. Of the 33 who we believed had internet at home, three said they could not really use it at all, or only with help.

You do not have to have one at home to be a confident internet users. Of the 16 that did *not* have a computer at home, 5 said they were either confident users or could use it confidently for some things. People who do not have the internet at home may still use it away from home. Of those who did not have internet at home, about one third did not use it anywhere else. Of those who did have it at home, most also used it away from home.

Our group in the north were much more computer-active than those in the other two regions. All had computers at home (though one was not on the internet). This group were the most confident computer users, but half of them were recruited through an Age Concern project which takes computer literacy very seriously and makes extensive use of volunteer helpers. It is interesting to note that they were mostly female.

In the rather more middle class Hertfordshire group, only about half had computers at home, and not all of those were confident users. Only half of those home computers were connected to the internet. Perhaps also challenging expectations, more than half of the more working class south west sample also had computers at home and were confident users.

One thing to explore in a larger study might be whether having it at home, and therefore also being more confident in its use, means that you are more likely to be able to use it in say, Jobcentres or public libraries. If so, it would be a way in which the less well off are doubly excluded from participating in the benefits of computer technology.

Places where people had used a computer away from home included their workplace, and also, with help, at the advice service through which we contacted them. Some of the jobseekers mentioned the computers in Jobcentre Plus. Many mentioned the public library. Those who had been on computer courses mentioned that experience, including *learn direct* (learning) centres.

One told us she used the library computer to access Jobpoints and the Jobcentre Plus website, but one of the focus groups in the southwest pointed out that there are problems with that: each person is only allowed one free hour each day, which is limiting if you really want to carry out sustained searches. An example of good practice came from the Age Concern service in North Tyneside, which takes groups of clients to the library to enable access there for people who do not have a computer at home. Only one person mentioned using internet cafes when travelling, and another mentioned his next door neighbour.

As expected from existing research some older people at least use the internet as flexibly as younger people; they also seem to use it for similar things (though none mentioned music downloads). Besides job search and job applications which we went into in more detail later, examples they gave included:

- information generally
- work generally
- links to family, including MSN and e-mail
- banking
- leisure/cultural activities generally including researching holidays, flights, and hotels (one said he liked to 'see the hotels') and accessing theatre seating plans
- education
- photography

Five said they never used the internet (‘Never - could not possibly’) and four others expressed dislike, but they would if necessary. Three mentioned that they were obliged to use it, and had a couple of times only, at Jobcentre Plus or their advice centre. Others were equally guarded: ‘Only limited and very functional use’.

We asked how confident they felt in using the internet. Again there was a wide range, and in itself ‘confidence’ is not straightforward. Like people of any age, many were confident for some uses, but not for others: ‘Government work-related sites’; ‘family history’; ‘Research (Wikipedia), musician/music information. Can upload digital photos’; ‘Not confident for moving e-mails to folders’.

Family members were significant, but in contradictory ways. In some cases, having a child or partner who could use it and explain how was an encouragement; in other cases, it meant our respondent left it to that individual to do it for them.

[F, 61]’s husband uses internet extensively, and regularly encourages her to do so. She admits to a personal barrier, despite having good reading skills. Her literacy problem relates specifically to spelling.

It is not a static condition: some people were in the process of learning, or re-learning, to use it.

‘Can’t really use it at all but just learning it. Used to come to [course at centre] but stopped because of 3-week job - will restart’

Motivation began to emerge as a key factor: if it can give them something they want, some said they will try to learn. This cuts both ways.

‘Fairly confident. Aware there’s more but not really motivated – [I do] use it for e.g. news’

One of our respondents told us that he had a criminal record which resulted in his being debarred by the police from having a computer at home. Our interviewer did not feel it appropriate to pursue this but was interested because the respondent’s computer skills were poor, and had declared that he ‘Usually need[ed] help for any use’. He also expressed distrust of the internet. Among many other issues, this raises the question of whether other users might be worried about using the internet in case they inadvertently got directed to illegal or distressing sites which at the least might upset them, or at worst get them into trouble with the law.

We asked advisers if they saw a connection between someone’s internet confidence and their confidence in relation to job search. All agreed, adding that it is their standard practice to encourage clients to acquire and update computer skills. ‘A tremendous confidence boost, much more important than adult basic education’; ‘It’s a matter of being open to new opportunities’; ‘It’s a modern skill ...and all information is now on computers.’

It may work the other way, that social inclusion is more likely to encourage computer skills. One respondent’s 77-year old father had been developing his internet skills with an 87-year old man across the road, each sending the other links, ideas, jokes, etc. Our interviewer suggested that in this respect some much older people are not so different from teenagers (Green and Hannon, 2007) in that people with good social networks and friendship skills may be more likely to be on the participating side of the ‘digital divide’.

Use of the internet to obtain information about learning or work

Around half of our face-to-face sample had used the internet for this, which is low considering that they were all recruited through advice services that were providing information that way, and also supporting clients in the use of the internet. Unsurprisingly those who used it in this way were more likely to be confident internet users.

We asked those who had not yet done so, if they thought they might do so in future. Just over half said either yes or that they hoped to be *able* to soon, and the importance of motivation again emerged:

‘Yes, once more confident. I’m a curious sort of person. Depends on needing information’

Motivation worked in a number of ways. One referred to Dot Cotton on Eastenders. ‘Determined to be better than her.’ Others would have a go if they ever needed to: ‘Yes, e.g. to look at organisations where he might volunteer’. For one it depended on the quality of the site:

[Depending on] capacity of website/speed. Clarity - not too much on page, obvious links.’

Some said no, but the rest made comments which suggested that so long as they could talk to much-respected personal advisers in the local guidance service they could not imagine preferring to do it on-line.

It did not appear to be a question of not being able or having access: some individuals would just much rather do it some other way. People’s willingness to try the internet did not seem to be linked to their confidence in using it on their own, or even having an internet link at home – most of those who were highly reluctant to use it, did actually have the internet at home.

We asked whether *they* thought there was a link between age and a dislike of computers: ‘Some people think that older people don’t like to use things like the internet or e-mails. What do you think about that?’. This time we got more of the indignant response we expected. Eight people completely disagreed: ‘Rubbish’, ‘Nonsense’ ‘People make incorrect assumptions about older people and ICT.’ One woman said she knew many 70-80 year olds who are happy with internet and e-mails. But eleven of the 45 face-to-face users said yes, this was certainly true. One suggested it could maybe be put down to health problems or short-term memory loss and another agreed it was an age thing, perhaps because older people ‘Didn’t need to, so didn’t see the point’.

However, the largest group, 18 people, said that it was a matter of individual preference and interests. ‘Some don’t but many do.’ Two who could not use the internet themselves fell into this group ‘It’s just me’. But most were more positive: ‘Not brought up with it - but can do it.’

‘Quite a few do, especially if they worked in an office. [Perhaps] much older people not a lot, but it will increase year by year.’

There were some interesting reflections on the processes involved. Motivation was crucial, said some: 'If they need it - they will use it - not unless'. One overseas lawyer, retraining in the UK, had never really thought of using computers himself in his country of origin as it was assumed his secretary would do it. He was now enjoying learning how to use a computer and felt he had missed out by not learning sooner. Another (M, 65) said:

'Initially no. But over time they get a "hand-me-down" computer from their children and start to use it for "grandbairns" Older people react against family assumptions that they are too old to learn. Power of knowing they can do what their own children can do.'

We put this question to the ten *learndirect* users. These were phone people, and generally they were not very interested in the internet. Two (F, early fifties) did not see themselves as an 'older person'. But two took the line that 'you are never too old to learn'. One of these was 71, and the other was on a CLAIT course where there were younger than him that have been put on it by the Job Centre who are struggling. He thought 'it is a myth that older people are the ones with problems when it comes to computers.'

There was an issue however about the dependence of *learndirect* advice on web-based resources, and this remains a problem however successful the new initiatives are in reaching the computer-confident. The *learndirect* advisers were concerned about the number of older users who are not comfortable with either computers or internet searching. The problem is potentially twofold: some people do not have sufficient IT skills to apply for jobs; some people are not able to use web-based tools. *Learndirect* advisers said that callers are always asked if they have access to internet and are comfortable using it. Sometimes advisers go through sites with people. But there was general consensus amongst the advisers that paper-based resources should be available for those people that are not comfortable with IT-based searches etc. They used to have these but have been discontinued.

Findings 4: Use of e-mail

Following the pattern for the other media, we asked our face-to-face sample how confident they were generally about using e-mail. Again, there was a good spread of confidence between very, to using it for some things but not for others, to not being able to use it at all. E-mail confidence correlated closely with internet confidence, so showed the same regional differences. But many were hoping to improve. Around half of the less confident in the southwest and Hertfordshire had plans to improve their e-mailing skills.

The middle group mentioned things like communicating with friends in far-off places but nothing else, or sending greeting cards or digital photography. One said he 'had an address but did not use it much', and another uses it 'only really for brief messages'. A couple felt their skills were not yet adequate: 'Knows how to check e-mail, but does not use it much'; 'Just learned to retrieve messages'.

So this situation could also change with enough motivation and this does not need to come from work- or learning-related issues. One male respondent wants to learn in order to be able to communicate with his son in the forces. But this can also work both ways. One respondent could use it, because he had learnt at work, but he had bad memories of people who had used it there aggressively 'Too often people covering their back.' He 'preferred to talk'.

Again, actual skills may not be so important as motivation. We asked our 45 face-to-face respondents if they had yet used e-mail for learning and work enquiries. Only eight of them had done so, but half were people who said they did not feel so confident about using e-mail.

When we asked those who said they had not yet used e-mail in this way, if they could imagine that they ever might, only four said they definitely could imagine doing so. One of these said 'Yes, for example for setting up a business'. Others were more directly negative: 'Can't see the necessity'; 'Always prefer to ask face-to-face'. Some could see it as a possibility though remote: 'Yes but *learn direct, nextstep* and Jobcentre Plus adequate at present'. Others were not against it, they just did not feel they could do it yet: 'When skills improve'.

The potential problem is wider than just use of e-mail as a means of correspondence. A linked issue is the need for keyboarding skills to be able to make on-line applications, which came up with a number of respondents. One had been calling in at high street shops with vacancy notices in the window, and was told the only way to apply is through an on-line form.

So we also asked whether simple keyboard skills were the problem. One might expect this to relate to gender, as more women might have had the opportunity to acquire these skills through clerical jobs earlier in life. In fact, with our sample, only a slightly lower proportion of the men felt confident in their key-board skills than the women, and this was true for the over 60s as well as the people in their 50s.

Even in this heterogeneous group, nearly a third felt they did not have sufficient keyboard skills, which is a concern for all ICT-related work. However, the story is again more complicated. With successive questions spread through the interview we asked people how confident they felt with using the internet, with using e-mail, and with keyboarding skills in general. There was of course some correlation between the

three but a total of 5 across the whole 45 said they did not have keyboarding skills but were reasonably or even very confident about e-mail, and a different 5 had the keyboard skills but did not feel able to use e-mail. Overall, only 22 of the 45 face-to-face clients felt truly confident in across all their ICT skills.

Advisers felt that lack of e-mail and related skills was a disadvantage. Again, most felt that there were some older people who were able to use it, and one mentioned particularly what an advantage it was for disabled clients. One commented in relation to on-line applications that it was difficult for some clients to organise the information they need, and if they are applying away from home at a Jobcentre, for example, they do not feel they have the time needed to work up an application. One who had experience of running a *nextstep* e-mail enquiry service said that older clients had not used it very much.

The adviser at the job search service in the southwest for Jobcentre Plus clients thought that most of the older people had problems, but of the eight in her service that we interviewed, half told us they either were confident e-mailers or could at least use it for some things (a further example suggesting that perhaps they were not showing themselves in their best light to the organisers of this programme).

Findings 5: Comparing services

Reliability. We asked our 45 face-to-face respondents which source of information they would be most likely to trust out of a telephone or e-mail service, an internet service, a face to face service, or someone they knew personally. All but one said they would trust a face-to-face service or someone they knew personally, although they varied about equally over which of those they most trusted. The one exception said they would only trust information they got in writing 'But very dependant on the issue being addressed.' Others also expressed the view that any advice would be more trustworthy if it was confirmed in writing and one mentioned that this was an advantage of e-mail over telephone.

But some wanted to distinguish between the medium and how much they trusted the individual adviser at the other end.

'Depends who the person on the other end is and what you know of them'
'Aware of need to be careful about where "they" are coming from'

The reason one gave for trusting a face-to-face service is that 'you can judge the person', and three related this to age: 'Older people like to make a visual judgement of what that person is like' 'Older people are apprehensive (about phone or e-mail); '(On the telephone) older people don't want to offend'.

There was even more suspicion about web-based services: 'Less likely (in fact suspicious)'. Others were willing to make cautious use of internet information: 'Depends, as they get to grips with it'; 'National Trust mentioned as trusted site.'

The *learnirect* interviews, conducted by phone, did not all cover this question, but one person said it depended on the person giving the advice and another said they would trust someone they knew, or a telephone service, over a website (several had said they would want to check website information by telephoning someone).

Could distance guidance ever be an alternative to face-to-face? We asked the face-to-face sample if they thought any of their recent enquiries could have been done instead by phone, internet or e-mail. Most still stated a clear preference for face-to-face. Two thought that initial contact at least ought to be face-to-face, conversely another thought that telephone, e-mail or internet might be 'OK for initial stages, but might want to check out face-to-face before committing'.

Three thought it *could* have been done by telephone, e-mail or internet but they preferred face-to-face and these included one who had actually used the *learnirect* helpline and said she liked it. But one did say 'Yes, what he had could have been done by phone or internet', and another said 'Yes, probably' and one 'Perhaps some'. Another said 'Yes when competent'.

What would be lost if they could only seek advice through telephone or computer? The response strongly confirmed the face to face preference. Many mentioned the importance of human contact and local knowledge, but two referred to the need to see a face to interpret meaning:

'Know what people mean if you can see their face. Confidence in person vs. suspicions about [what they're] really getting after.'

Two mentioned their fear that they would be hurried through a telephone interaction. One person mentioned as a *disadvantage* the a-synchronous nature of e-mail which Watts and Dent suggested is one of its advantages:

'Face-to-face you get a response and know you've got answers. No control over when you get a reply with e-mail'

If there were no face-to-face service two felt they could manage with phone but not e-mail:

'Probably not with phone (gives you chance to think on feet) but would be with e-mail'

'You wouldn't be able to express yourself as well by email; phone is better.'

Two others felt the other way round. Two thought some of the work would be all right by phone, but only if you knew the adviser already. And one suggested that an even more integrated, but entirely face-to-face, service would be an improvement on the help they had already received: 'Should have had Jobcentre Plus on site as well.' Only one person did say there would be no loss, but this was someone at the job search programme where there had been no professional support at all.

Twelve people could see that there might be some point in a telephone or computer-based service (mainly for others who did not have the benefit of their particular face-to-face service). Comments included:

- Only if you can't get to services (transport for example) [three people mentioned no need to travel as an advantage]
- Accessible at all times [three people mentioned this]
- Yes, if negotiating/ discussing, it is easier if not face-to-face if you don't like person. Also may be less likely to digress
- Yes, immediacy; print out and think about it. 'There's a time and place.' What's best for that thing.
- Access to wide range of info such as vacancies.
- Speed, convenience [two mentions of convenience]
- You would get to know sites in the end.

Combining different media. What about a service that combined telephone, internet and e-mail with face-to-face? The eight of the *learn direct* sample who answered this question could generally see the advantage of a service that combined all three media, but none gave as a reason that this would encourage them to use a face-to-face service. Five reiterated that they would anyway continue to use the phone.

This question got a better reception from the face-to-face sample than the earlier ones asking about other media. Although nine people still said they could see no advantage, there were more constructive remarks from (a different) nineteen. However, most of these referred to the possibility of extending or enlarging on the contact they had with their face-to-face adviser before or after seeing them. Some could see the advantage of choice:

'Yes... people can use the one that suits them.'

'Yes, doing things at home if you want to.'

'Maybe. Hours/travel issues for some people.'

Two appeared to refer to the advantage of a telephone service to use during the inevitable periods in unemployment when you get low in spirits

'Yes, it can support you if depressed.'

'Yes, convenience of having a person to talk to.'

But one was suspicious: 'Is this a way of 'weeding out' older people?'

Would you rather have someone your age or older to help you? We asked the advisers if their clients ever expressed a preference for an older adviser. Two of the *nextstep* advisers did not exactly answer this, but gave their own opinion that 'It's how you treat people'; 'Attitude not age'. The third *nextstep* adviser, and the adviser working for the Jobcentre Plus job search programme, said that older clients did sometimes ask for an older adviser (and their services could arrange it). The Age Concern adviser said she and her colleague were both over 50 so it did not come up. But she too believed 'it's not age, but the relationship'; they used to have a younger adviser at their service, but never got any complaints. However, she reported that her clients did complain about young advisers at Jobcentre Plus. The *learnirect* advisers had no experience of anyone asking for an older adviser, and felt that service users would not be aware of their adviser's age. So of the face to face advisers it was about equally divided and the *learnirect* advisers felt it was not an issue.

This question came at the end of the interview schedule for the service users, and not everyone answered it. But 32 of the full 55 did, and of them, eleven said they did not mind on the age of the adviser: 'No preference - if they know what they are talking about'. The numbers of men and women were about equal and the ages spread right through our range.

But the rest did express a preference for an older adviser. Nine stated a straight preference. 'They appreciate changes with ageing.'

M, 64 'Younger people don't really know how to speak to older people to catch their attention, for example their use of abrupt or fast speech.' He gave the example of supermarket staff. 'It's not lack of respect. Just their way of doing things.'

Another 12 said they would prefer someone older, though it also depended how good they were. 'As long as older person was knowledgeable, but also applies to younger. But would assume 50+ would understand better. When he was young, he never thought what it would be like to be 50+'

Only three *learnirect* users answered this. One (F, 52) said she would prefer someone her age but did not feel strongly, recognising that it might not be easy to provide older staff. Another woman did not mind. Our interviewer noted that it clearly was not something she had thought about. 'She was still getting to grips with the idea of making a career change.' The oldest person in the study (M, 75) said he had no concerns about age of advisers for his enquiry (a language class) but suggested this might be more of an issue for people asking more in-depth questions.

Findings 6: Supporting older clients' use of ICT

This section focuses on the help needed by older clients using ICT as part of face-to-face provision, as it emerged from our interviews with practitioners. As this work is strongly shaped by the nature of the service and in particular the funding available, it may be helpful to give two examples of our practitioner interviews in the context of their services.

1. Hertsmere Worknet is “a ‘not for profit’ company offering a co-ordinated approach to training, guidance and employment services to Hertsmere residents and businesses” (www.worknet.org.uk). Its target group is adults over 20, and it uses funding from different streams including *nextstep*, the European Social Fund, the Lottery and local contracts. A special project targeted at older people, the ‘Golden Mouse’ is located within this same agency, and funded through the Lottery. It takes outreach activities to places where older people go anyway, and individuals can join a club which entitles them to four lessons a month for a year at the centre. Some of the clients of the guidance service we spoke to were people who were participating in that. Our practitioner interview was with the careers adviser.

She talked to us about the older adults that she sees, about 20 each week, who constitute about 15% of their total clients. They range in age from 50 into their early 60s. Many are recent workers, and come especially after redundancy, mostly seeking learning advice and skill development. Some are not looking for jobs immediately, but taking time out. But some do want help with job search, especially with using Jobpoints in Jobcentre Plus. Among the questions that tend to emerge is what they really want to do, for example go back full- or part-time, and if they have not changed job for long time they have particular problems with CVs. How do they differ from younger clients? They ‘feel on the scrap heap’. If they lost a job after a long time, they feel it as very personal. She thought that young people understand that this is how jobs are now.

She tries to meet their needs through confidence-building, and making them feel good about themselves, and she takes them through the practicalities of job search. She commented, ‘Low self-esteem is ageing’. She finds the greatest challenges are in working with the few that have mental health or, for example, personal hygiene problems. Some clients want an ‘employment agency’ service, that is, for her to take control of getting them a job. She is not able to provide this, and sees building clients’ self-sufficiency as part of her work.

She would like to be able to be more active with them in the early days of unemployment. Six months wait for additional support is too long: it lets people get into habits of unemployment and depresses confidence. Worknet can sometimes offer placements and work trials more quickly through its networks with employers, and this is often very helpful. But they cannot meet all the need for this. She said that there are problems with some national schemes for job trials that are hard to implement at local level: the boardroom of a large company may be willing, but local management less so.

Using the telephone. She encourages them to take action themselves except when she judges them unlikely to be able to do so. Sometimes she will start the call and hand over: some are confident without this, others would prefer her to do it all.

Computers are an integral part of the service, and they have staff around to help people using them on their own. They encourage clients to use it to get familiar with the technology so that they can use them elsewhere, for example at Jobpoints. She believes computers are central to clients' vocational skills. Assessing if they are really confident internet users is integral to how she works with people. She recommends Adult Directions and Forties People (www.fortiespeople.co.uk/), a local service, and goes through Job Profiles, but usually with them. She also recommends specialist recruitment agencies (eg Manpower who have a contract with the local county council which includes care and schools). If from her own experience she had found the navigation difficult, she would not recommend it. She thought some older clients are able to cope, and 'once they know how to do it, it's not a problem'. Any problems with computer skills can be addressed within the service.

The agency does run a direct e-mail guidance service but this is not generally used by older people. The adviser thought many did not have access to e-mail and only a minority were confident users. She said 'Most preferred to talk "properly": one thing leads to another' and you get immediate feedback in an interview. But she agreed that it would be useful for clients to use e-mail, especially for job applications.

2. The Age Concern North Tyneside (ACNT) 'Back on Board' (BoB) service is one of many services offered by ACNT, including a welfare rights service and an internet café, operating from the same building: support for each individual is closely integrated (www.ageconcernnorthtyne.org). The service is run by a few key employees, with very high levels of volunteer staffing. The oldest client is 84 but most are between 50 and 60, and not many are retired, but as the Employment Advice and Support Worker to whom we spoke said, it depends how you define 'retired'. The BoB service is aimed at those seeking employment but because of *nextstep* constraints they target those on Incapacity Benefit, people below level 2, and are now further restricted by postcode. She commented that this means needy people elsewhere get little service.

Her clients want help with job search but also help to identify change of direction, to identify courses and leisure activities, and volunteering either for its own sake or as a stepping stone into paid employment. How are the issues different from those of younger clients? She thought some are very similar to those of women returners in younger age groups that she used to work with in previous jobs: negative stereotyping, overcoming barriers of finance, pressures of caring, and feeling that they do not have choices. She suggested that perhaps younger people would be looking for career prospects and perhaps 'those who have money have more choices.'

BoB meets the needs of its older clients by providing a range of activities beyond the one-to-one guidance interview, including group sessions, in-house training provision, volunteering opportunities, signposting to other organisations. The adviser would like to provide placement in actual jobs, and a wider range of job search support but they are restricted to the time limitation of only having one advice worker. She said she would also like to be able to offer more qualifications and workshops.

Their referral network is very important to their work, especially because of the diversity of people's needs and the size of their borough. There are difficulties in making this work when funding pressures encourage a competitive target culture, but they work hard to overcome this through communication both at a service delivery and a strategic level. They also attempt to avoid clients feeling passed around too much by trying to maintain contact with them.

Telephones. She is not always confident that clients will make the phone calls she recommends after an interview, and many prefer her to call. She may encourage them to ring from the premises, and she has to make a judgment as to whether to do so or not. She hears negative comments about Jobcentre Plus advisers giving clients a telephone number to follow up jobs themselves, and benefit claimants being told that they have to use a phone box to make calls.

Computers. They encourage clients to use computers while at the service, and volunteers are available to help people with difficulties. She saw some link between confidence with computers and their ability to achieve other goals: it was often a matter of low self-esteem, and being open to new opportunities. But she said it was very important not to generalise. Some who have confidence and skill in using information technology, do not use it out of real choice. Computer skills depended more on work history and other characteristics. And they were not the only important thing: as she said, postmen have no IT skills but do have good work records.

Would older adults be able to use a guidance service that depends on materials on the internet? She thought this would improve as age cohorts move through but some will always dislike it. She thought the answer was to offer assistance as they do in their internet café. They encourage clients to use the internet while at the service, and in other centres such as libraries, and Ukonline. She makes the judgement about whether they can (and therefore whether to recommend it) partly through common sense, and sometimes through watching how they get on with Adult Directions. Some older adults can use e-mail and she gave one example of a person with a learning disability who uses it extensively. She too said that it has real advantages as job applications are increasingly on line. It could be a good investment for people as they get older for other reasons: for example it is useful for people who are housebound. This adviser suggests to clients they get practice with the Jobcentre Plus websites, *nextstep* with its links to Advice Resources, *learnirect* coursefinder, and the local 'Sector 1' which lists jobs in the public and voluntary sector.

What kind of support suits them best? Older people like informal peer group projects and not college courses where they are mixed in with all people of ages where some people hide their skill level in order to avoid risk of being shown up. In peer groups there is less danger of looking silly.

Lessons learnt

There was a clear consensus from all of our face-to-face practitioner interviews about the spectrum of abilities and need for support. As well as those who are ICT-confident there are many who are not, and it was interesting that most services mentioned an increase in people with mental health problems. One of our southwest *nextstep* practitioners said their service can only be about signposting: they do what they can to refer clients to the shorter courses that they ask for, and make appointments for them to see other agencies, but 'these clients need follow-through'.

Other practitioners too mentioned the complexity of some requests for help, and that it is not a matter of simple answers off the internet, even for those who can use it. The same southwest *nextstep* practitioner mentioned needs around counselling and financial advice and both financial advice and mental health were mentioned by our practitioner in the north west. She made referrals to the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Age Concern, and a local Wellbeing Centre, and tries to accompany clients where necessary which she said aids confidence building.

While computers and ICT skills are an important part of all services, so too is the need for personal support and also encouragement. Confidence building appears to be a widespread need for older clients, and encouragement in one-to-one sessions and peer group support are found to be helpful.

Interviews with our face-to-face providers confirmed that internet and e-mail skills have an obvious practical value to older clients in job search and beyond, but they also appear to be linked to self-confidence and inclusion in a more abstract way. The services which encourage the development of these skills are more valued than those which write older people off as unable or unlikely to acquire them.

However, there are still people who will not be able, or not be comfortable, operating through ICT. Careers guidance provision, particularly where it aims to help more vulnerable people back into the labour market, must provide the opportunity to acquire ICT skills, must offer the use of internet and telephone links, but must also ensure personal support in its use.

Next steps

The findings and recommendations from this study are presented at pages 4 and 7. We were only able to explore a small part of this topic because of the scale of the project. In reflecting on the part to be played by ICT in a unified Adult Advancement and Careers Service, it is very important to look at the role of computers in service delivery of one of its main partners, Jobcentre Plus, and this we were unable to do.

Recent reports have suggested that poorer people who cannot afford landlines are paying a large proportion of their benefit income in telephone charges (Guardian, 2008) to carry out the telephoning needed to demonstrate entitlement, a paradox of which our respondents were aware and which was colouring their views of telephones as a way of seeking help.

Some older people in our study mentioned the difficulty they experienced with the central role now played by telephones and computers in the help offered by Jobcentre Plus. Our study indicates that this will not disadvantage all older users, but many looking for work after thirty years in a job that had no keyboarding element (one of our advisers was particularly concerned about a former postman she was trying to help) will find this difficult. Although we did not ask about it, two of our older users mentioned the difficulties caused by not having someone available to ask for help during their Jobcentre Plus searches, and our fieldwork with the Jobcentre Plus contracted-out programme for jobsearchers suggests that this difficulty with ICT is not always given the attention it needs. More work is needed in this area.

We would also like to see an exploration of this problem among people over 50 who are not linked to any advice service but may wish to explore employment options possibly through their employer. This may be work to take forward within the Sector Skills Councils, as it is clear that career decisions after the age of 50 are shaped to a great extent by the sector in which someone has worked up till then, or to which they wish to transfer.

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