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Teens Take Elders to Tech Boot Camp

By SUE SHELLENBARGER



Al Kouba, who lives in Bend, Ore., was told by his son in California that his family's Christmas letter would only be posted on Facebook—not mailed. That's when the retired systems engineer knew it was time to play catch up: "If you're going to communicate with your family, you have to be on Facebook," he says.

So he turned to a technology expert: his 15-year-old granddaughter, Marlee Norr. But as Marlee explained the steps to log on to the social-networking site, Mr. Kouba protested: "Look, kid, I'm 77 years old! I'm not quite as swift as I used to be." Both laughed, says Marlee, also of Bend, and she agreed to "back up and slow down."



WSJ's Andy Jordan reports on a new no-frills cell phone aimed at senior citizens, complete with big concave buttons, a bright screen, and handy speed-dials.

Teens can be motivational teachers for the elderly because of their enthusiasm for technology and agility with gadgetry. But, oh, the eye-rolling. These pair-ups can expose daunting cognitive and psychological gaps between generations, forcing young and old alike to adjust their attitudes.

A growing number of programs are training teens to work with seniors. The Central Oregon Council on Aging, a Redmond, Ore., senior-services agency, enrolled 70 people last year for tech training by teens from a nearby high school's computer class, and 100 more are signed up this year. A Carmel, Ind., nonprofit, Net Literacy, enlists 400 to 600 middle- and high-school students each year for a senior tech-training program called "Senior Connects." And at New York's Pace University, a popular service-learning program sends students to retirement facilities to teach seniors skills from email and online banking to Wii and video chat.

Tech Diary: Rockin' Seniors

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A new gadget called "Chord Buddy" is allowing seniors afflicted with arthritis to play the guitar. WSJ's Andy Jordan got some residents at a senior living community to rock out with it.



Technology use among elderly Americans is low, relative to the rest of the population. Only 30% to 58% of people 65 and over go online, compared with a U.S. average of 79%, according to a 2010 study of 2,252 adults released last month by the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C.

But times are changing. Seniors 74-years-old and older are the fastest-growing age group on social-networking sites, where usage has quadrupled since 2008 to 16% from 4%, the study shows.

Many older people face cognitive hurdles. Studies show that as they age, many seniors lose some of their ability to remember,



Leah Nash for The Wall Street Journal

Marlee Norr, 15, shows her grandfather Al Kouba how to change his ringtone in a tech tutoring session

solve problems and process new information quickly. There are psychological hurdles as well. Among people over 65 who avoid using the Internet, the main reasons cited are that they either don't feel comfortable or skillful enough to use computers, or they believe "the Internet is a dangerous place," says John B. Horrigan, vice president, policy research, for TechNet, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit advocacy group.

These deficits may loom particularly large when a senior is seated across from a teenager who has been using computer and digital technology since elementary school. The Central Oregon Council teaches its teenage tutors not to roll their eyes if a senior points the mouse directly at the computer screen, and to avoid tossing around terms like "gigabyte."

Who's Online?

Percentage of the Internet-using population

Millennials (18-33 years old)

35%

Gen X (34-45)

21

Younger Boomers (46-55)

20

Older Boomers (56-64)

13

Silent Generation (65-73)

5

G.I. Generation (74 and over)

3

Note: Figures do not add up to 100% because of rounding.
Source: Pew Research Center

To spark students' empathy for elders' physical impairments, the Pace University program includes sensitivity training, says Jean Coppola, an associate professor who runs the program. Students practice using computers wearing Vaseline-smear sunglasses and cotton balls in their ears, with two of their fingers taped together.

Students in Net Literacy rewrote tech-training lesson plans in large type, adding pictures and removing jargon to make it more inviting, says Don Kent, the Indiana organization's president. They also work one-on-one with seniors so each can learn at his or her own speed, Mr. Kent says.

Morgan Starks, 21, a Purdue University student and former Net Literacy tutor, says she started her training sessions by introducing online activities older people already enjoyed, such as playing solitaire or finding recipes. This gave seniors a compelling reason to practice using a mouse.

Some older people are afraid of breaking high-tech gear or making irreversible mistakes. Twenty-year-old Brian Kelley, another former Net Literacy tutor and Purdue student, says he actually took computers apart in front of his elderly trainees so they could see that the parts are sturdy and unlikely to break.

Resources

www.eldercare.gov or 1-800-677-1116: Referrals to aging agencies for information about senior tech-training programs in your area.

SeniorConnects.org : Click on 'Lesson Plans' for training materials tailored to older adults.

Oats.org : Tech-education resources and links to senior blogs and online communities.

TheProjectGoal.org : Information and resources promoting Internet use by older adults.

While seniors are learning technology, teens are learning patience. "There really is no hurrying someone along when they're trying to learn something," Mr. Kelley says. But he found he was able to "tap into a well of patience" inside himself to take the step-by-step approach many elders needed. The rewards were worth the effort, he says. One older couple he worked with cried when they received their first family photo via email—a foal born on their daughter's farm thousands of miles away.

Seniors often have to change their approach to learning, too. Jerry Thackery, 68, of Redmond, Ore., a semi-retired highway engineer, made a discipline of memorizing steps in new skills he was learning. But when he signed up for tech tutoring at the Bend, Ore., aging agency, he quickly saw that this approach didn't work with his teenage tutor.

"For the kids who are doing this technology, they just pick it up by flipping here and crossing over there, and I go, 'Holy cow!' They seem to have that exploratory skill," he says. His tutor helped him realize "I was making it more complicated than it needed to be. I finally abandoned my note-pad approach" and began trying new steps spontaneously, Mr. Thackery says. Now, he emails cellphone photos to his three sons, brother and friends and

has begun using Facebook.

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When Joan Iselin, 68, of Sun River, Ore., wanted to connect on Facebook with her two adult children and four grandchildren, she turned to her granddaughter, Sierra Sullivan, 18, a University of Oregon freshman. At first, Ms. Sullivan used words she didn't understand and jumped a little too quickly from one function to another, Ms. Iselin says. She sometimes

had to ask her granddaughter to repeat herself.

But Ms. Iselin soon realized going online "is not as difficult as I thought." She set up her own Facebook page and began posting on her grandkids' walls. She has since moved on to texting and says she loves the "instant gratification" it provides.

And after being with peers who "know all the shortcuts," Ms. Sullivan says, she realized that with older people "you can't assume they know the steps." But after she learned to slow down, "I really liked seeing the light bulb go on," Ms. Sullivan says. "It is really cool that I can Skype with my grandparents and talk about life."

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