Despite good intentions, seniors are left behind with digital progress

By Richard Scenna
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The rapid pace of moving basic services online during the disruption of COVID-19 has been well documented, even surprising some organisations with their own agility to respond.

While these advances are to be celebrated, and are on the face of it great steps forward, there is a downside of this natural progression for some consumers. The assumption that sits behind them is that all consumers have access to technology and know how to use it. The result? Seniors are being left behind, excluded from this wave of digital change and the opportunities it creates.

The 2020 Australian Digital Inclusion Index highlights that people over 65 remain amongst the least digitally included age group in the country. The research reveals a pattern of diminishing digital inclusion as age increases – particularly in relation to access and digital ability. The analysis highlights that the gap between this age group and the most digitally-included age group of 35-49 remains wider than that recorded in 2014.

The serious mental health and wellbeing implications of many older Australians not being able to use the internet as an alternative to face-to-face interactions or access of essential services are profound. Both in terms of greater risk of isolation and disconnection.

2020 has taught us many lessons about keeping our distance. All of this physical restriction has driven innovation in how we access information and fulfil our needs online. The pace of this change is further widening the digital divide for seniors and for more than two million Australians who are not online.

In our research we have identified nine recent examples where the drive for delivery through digital and contactless initiatives assume a level of digital access or ability.

- **Government services** - The NSW Government recently announced a $100 voucher scheme designed to boost the local economy but requires access to the Service NSW app to take part.

- **Cashless transactions** - the almost immediate move away from cash as a result of COVID-19 where retailers requested only paypass, cards or ApplePay/Google Pay. According to the Australian Banking Association (ABA), this impacted more than half a million customers who actively use a passbook account or transaction account with no linked debit card. Many of these customers were over 70 years of age.

- **Quick Response (QR) codes** - now generally required upon entry into venues, restaurants and group locations to support contact tracing. The assumption of knowledge in using these challenges even some of us who are digitally literate, let alone for seniors navigating tiny input fields in forms.

- **Travel** - Qantas announced that they will permanently close its service and sales desks at all airports and lounges, leaving passengers to deal with cancellations and last-minute booking changes themselves at self-service kiosks, online or through a call centre.

- **Online shopping** - a necessity during lockdown with retailers continuing to promote this channel as a key part of their marketing approach. In addition, many stores and some banks have since closed outlets/branches reducing physical access.

- **Public safety alerts** - the Fires Near Me app and website was the most popular way to keep alerted to any risk to you and your family given the speed at which the fires spread. Without knowledge of the device, seniors were left to the media and word of mouth for updates.

- **Telehealth and online consultations** - doctors and medical practices providing virtual consultations through telehealth platforms as a safer alternative if you have access.

- **COVID-19 alerts and tracing** - websites and apps have become essential resources to stay informed and aware of critical information related to COVID-19 and hotspots.

- **Face-to-face restrictions** - funerals, weddings, aged care visitations and hospital visits all became restricted in person and to be included you need access through online platforms like Zoom.

Restricted access to goods, services and the community creates a negative domino effect on mental wellbeing, independence and quality of life, especially for those who are the most vulnerable without this access.

So how do we maintain the rapid advances in technology and adopt digital solutions as a critical response to issues like COVID-19 and bushfires without leaving anyone behind?

The voice of seniors: what they told us

The work we do to equip seniors with devices and the knowledge and confidence to use them means we see first hand the impact of this exclusion and the difference that can be made.

We surveyed some of our clients to ask which of the services they feel most excluded from. Not surprisingly it is the essential government and health services, and the banking system which create the biggest impact. See graph below.

They indicated that online access to utilities such as gas, electricity and telephone – and to a lesser extent, health and wellbeing, superannuation and travel services – was also of concern.

We were a little surprised at the response on retail but then when we dug a little deeper we found those who were able counted going to the shops as an important part of their day. As a result, online shopping did not feature as highly in terms of exclusion.

Aged care providers could bridge the gap

The research revealed that the overwhelming majority of respondents – 93 per cent – felt aged care providers could help them be more digitally connected, and have an essential role to play.

93% said
aged care providers
should provide digital
training as a
basic service

Which services do you feel excluded from, or believe others are excluded from, without the right technology and confidence?
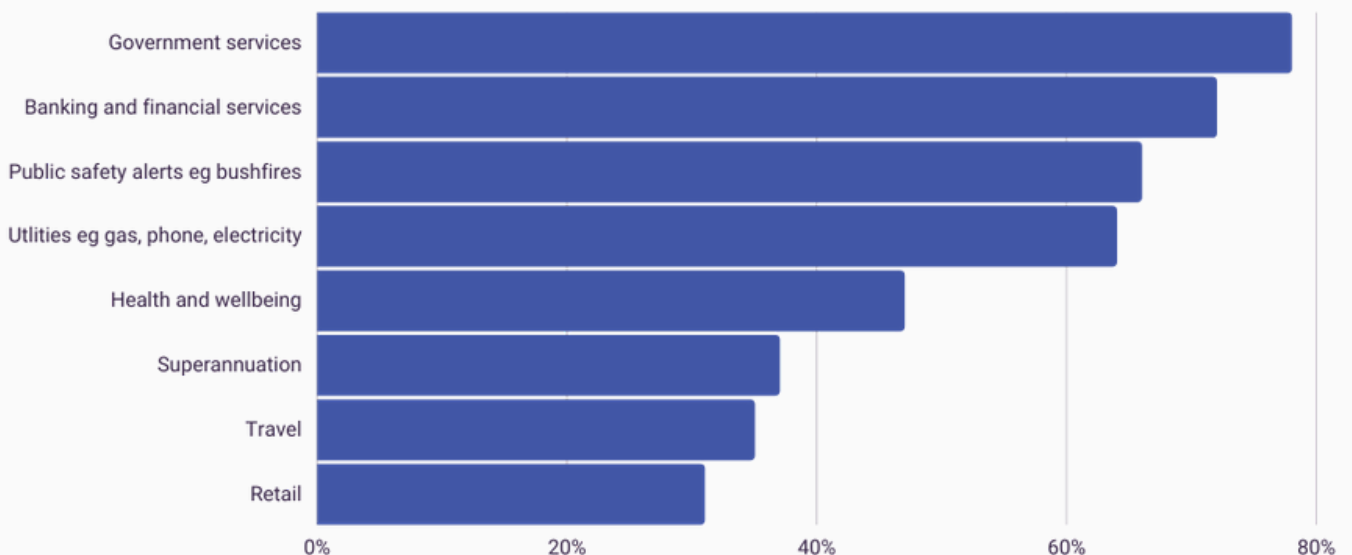
Where to from here?

We need to continue this conversation. Closing the digital divide experienced by seniors is no mean feat. To even narrow the divide, it will take a considered approach that will involve government, business and the aged care sector itself.

The questions we have on our mind to frame this conversation:

- How can businesses and government driving technology advancements achieve more equitable access to avoid unintentionally impacting potential user groups?

- How can technology providers create more affordable and universal access solutions?

- How can state and federal government initiatives focussed on digital evolution be more integrated?

- How can the aged care sector create a more connected seniors community through equal technology access and confidence as a baseline in their services?

What questions does this raise for you? What solutions have you seen that stand out? How might we all work together to narrow the digital divide?

Let's talk.
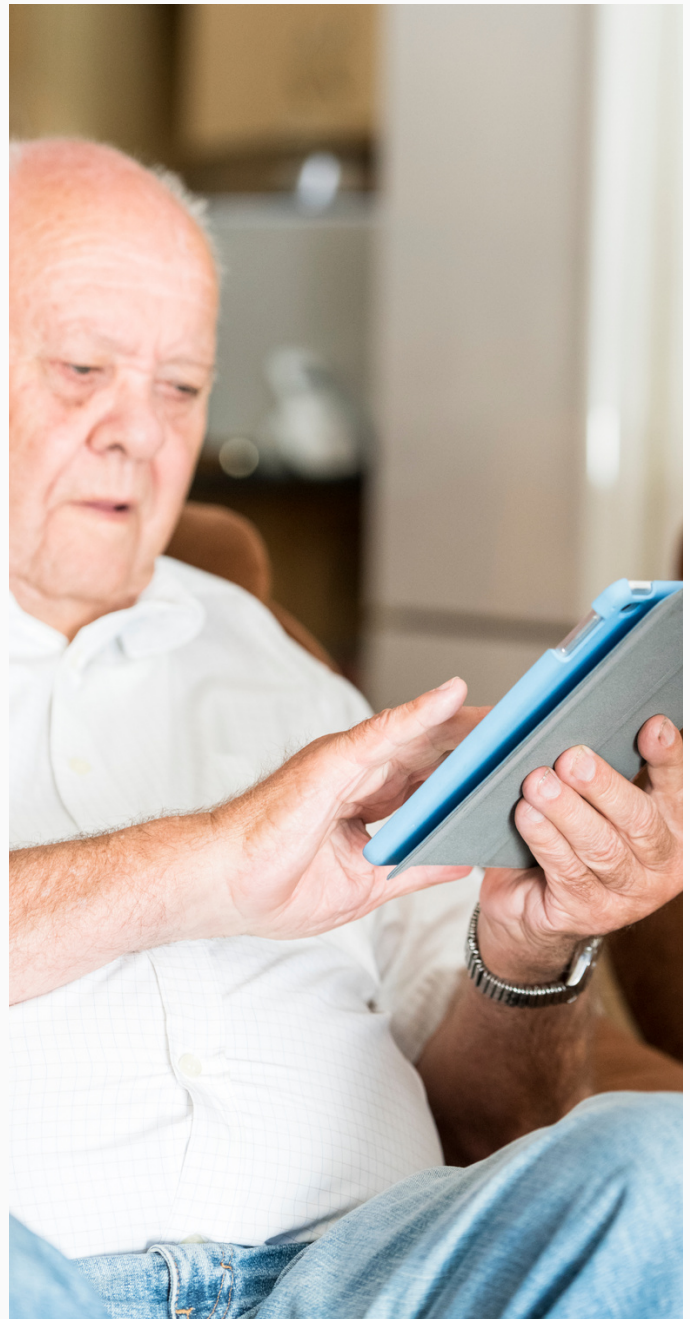
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People over 65 are the least digitally included in Australia. Restricted access to goods, services and the community creates a negative domino effect on mental wellbeing, independence and quality of life.

1 ESSENTIAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Without digital access, seniors face visiting branches or long phone waiting times

2 CASHLESS TRANSACTIONS

Hundreds of thousands of seniors use manual banking options so need extra support to adapt

3 QR CODES

Require both access and fine motor skills; without these seniors face restrictions at public venues

4 TRAVEL

Fewer travel agents and a move to contactless check-in disadvantages seniors without access

5 ONLINE SHOPPING

With restricted access to stores, seniors will be limited to goods that are physically available

6 PUBLIC SAFETY ALERTS

Fear arises through limited access to timely safety information about bushfires, weather etc

7 TELEHEALTH AND ONLINE CONSULTATIONS

Without telehealth access seniors face travel, waiting periods and discomfort in GP offices

8 COVID-19 CONTACT TRACING & ALERTS

Reliance on free to air broadcasting and print media vs updates via apps adds to uncertainty

9 FACE-TO-FACE RESTRICTIONS

The absence of interactions with loved ones has mental health and wellbeing consequences

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