Designing a digital world where your parents feel at ease

New technologies should be made less daunting for the elderly. Adult children, helping their ageing parents navigate digital transactions, also need more support.

Lim Sun Sun

You know that nerve-racking feeling when your elderly parents call you with a tech problem and you must instantly morph into an all-knowing IT helpdesk?

In our ageing society that is technologising rapidly, this is a common experience for a growing number of us in the sandwich generation.

Caught between yet another app upgrade and our ageing parents' rudimentary digital skills, we struggle to find the right vocabulary to explain the hows, whys and wherefores of different digital transactions. Never mind our own levels of technological (in)competence, we have to step up and be our parents' digital concierge, cyber-security officer, fintech adviser and media literacy tutor, all rolled into one.

Even as we recognise the benefits of our digital push, there will inevitably be a lag between the rate of innovation adoption and the pace of individual upskilling. Be it figuring out how to download CDC vouchers, reschedule a medical appointment or reset a banking password, digital gaps rear their head often, and across a vast spectrum of digital tasks in our tech-driven lives.

More than an inconvenience, it is a broader challenge that impinges on the well-being, dignity and autonomy of older adults. Furthermore, it places an enormous burden, emotional, mental and time-wise, on us adult children and caregivers, who are often juggling work, raising children and, now, troubleshooting technology.

A Shopee staff member teaching a senior to use the shopping app at a digital literacy event in 2024. Studies show that many older adults are willing to adopt new technologies if they are intuitive and relevant to the users' daily routines, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

And we are often torn between frustratingly difficult choices: Do we make the laborious and time-consuming effort of teaching our elderly parents to use these apps and devices, or take the quicker route of simply doing it for them, but leaving them entirely reliant on us?

Nevertheless, we need not throw up our hands in despair and accept these trials as inevitable. Instead, we should pursue design innovations, educational interventions and support networks to help bridge these digital gaps.

The key, however, is for these to be thoughtfully and creatively undertaken and, crucially, with empathy for the everyday lived experiences of the elderly.

DESIGNING FOR THE ELDERLY

To begin with, the elderly may come across as technophobic and often blame themselves for being too slow to learn new skills when in reality, they are just underserved by design. Studies show that many older adults are

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willing to adopt new technologies if they are intuitive and relevant to their daily routines.

User experience design must thus start with a different set of assumptions: lower digital literacy, limited prior technology use, heavy reliance on mobile phones, the need for reassurance in security and privacy, and declining eyesight or dexterity.

Alas, the design thinking behind the current generation of digital services runs contrary to these very assumptions. Be they from banks, hospitals or

governments, mobile apps and online interfaces are largely built for younger users for whom tech is second nature.

Par for the course therefore are tiny fonts, indecipherable icons, confusing error messages and complex multi-factor authentication processes with tight time limits.

These are all aspects of mobile and online interfaces that may trip up even younger users, let alone the elderly who undertake digital tasks much less frequently.

The design process must also be

an inclusive one involving elderly users so as to observe their interactions, assess their difficulties and solicit their feedback. Time-honoured design principles such as simple language, clear and uncluttered interfaces, large fonts, high colour contrasts and avoiding small tap buttons for touchscreens should be fundamentals, not frills.

Besides designing technology with the elderly in mind, public education and outreach are also vital. I was delighted to see the Agency for Integrated Care run a Facebook campaign reminding the elderly on telltale signs of misinformation and the caution they should exercise before sharing news alerts.

Similarly, the Ministry of Digital Development and Information's DfL: Digital Clubs in collaboration with People's Association Active Ageing Council run programmes to expose senior citizens to digital skills in peer-to-peer learning environments. All these initiatives targeted squarely at the elderly are helpful and should be continued to build up their

confidence and vest them with a sense of self-efficacy.

SPARE A THOUGHT FOR CAREGIVERS

We also need to step up support for caregivers in their invisible labour of guiding the technology use of their elderly relatives. Especially welcome would be multilingual conversation guides together with sample posts or short videos that can help adult children explain difficult topics such as spreading falsehoods, discerning deepfakes, managing online privacy and avoiding cyberscams.

These are difficult subjects that need to be discussed in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust that may not be present in every household.

Digital literacy sessions tailored to caregivers should thus be launched to help them navigate the technical and emotional aspects of managing their parents' technology needs.

We currently have a wealth of resources helping parents to manage their young children's device use which is understandable and indeed necessary. But in an ageing society, it is just as critical to ramp up digital literacy support for adult children of elderly parents.

A friend of mine has a WhatsApp chat group where she and her cousins share tips and commiserate on all aspects of eldercare, including technology guidance. Such efforts are simple yet effective, and should be encouraged through public education.

And what of the elderly who live on their own? Are the current SG Digital Community Hubs, where Digital Ambassadors offer assistance with online tasks, sufficient and drawing the people who are truly in need of help? What other creative methods can we explore to extend greater digital support to the elderly who do not have the benefit of trusted family networks?

These are all questions we must seek to resolve as our country matures and embraces innovation. After all, technology should be a tool for empowerment, not exclusion. It should extend the autonomy and dignity of ageing populations, not erode it through layers of complexity and dependency.

Designing for the elderly and supporting their caregivers is not just about problem-solving – it's about fairness, inclusion and foresight in an era of demographic change.

If we get it right, the day may come when our own children won't need to double as tech support when we grow old. But until then, we must build a world where neither our parents nor we are left fumbling in frustration.

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