

Computers and seniors do go together

by [Harold Colton-Max](#)

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MetroWest CARES, the Committee Addressing Resources for Eldercare Services, is coordinated by United Jewish Communities with support from the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey; CARES brings together professionals and lay leaders from MetroWest agencies that provide services to older adults. Each month, a MetroWest CARES agency presents an educational column on an eldercare issue. This month's article features seniors using technology.



Dolly Moser, a resident of Lester Senior Housing and CogniFit coordinator, takes a turn on the program.

Conventional wisdom says that seniors and computer technology should never be included in the same sentence. After all, aren't people over a certain age likely to break into a cold sweat as soon as they're asked to find the "on" switch?

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Seniors and baby boomers are two of the Internet's fastest growing segments and statistics show further engagement and communication within social communities. Seniors are utilizing high-visibility social outlets to learn, interact, and promote themselves.

According to The Nielson Company, the number of seniors actively using the Internet has increased by more than 55 percent to 17 million. In addition, the average amount of time seniors spend online has increased by 11 percent during this time to over 58 hours a month, nearly two hours a day. The study also shows that seniors are engaged in many of the same activities that dominate other age segments — email, photo sharing, social networking, checking the latest news and weather, and searching for information on health, financial concerns, and travel.

It has also been shown that 8.2 percent of all social networks and blog visitors are over 65, just 0.1 percentage points less than the number of teenagers who frequent these sites. While Google Search is the most popular online destination for seniors, Facebook and YouTube rank three and four, respectively. Facebook, which was ranked No. 45 a year ago among sites visited by seniors and was once perceived as the channel exclusively for the "millennial generation" (ages 14-27), now has 7.9 million unique visitors among this segment, while YouTube has 7.6 million.

Brain games

We decided to put this trend to the test at the Jewish Community Housing Corporation. Last year, at Lester Senior Housing in Whippany, one of the five independent and assisted living communities owned and managed by the Jewish Community Housing Corporation, we introduced residents to a unique computerized program that is intended to enhance such basic cognitive skills as memory, perception, and attention. We decided to offer the program, created by CogniFit, an Israeli pioneer in the assessment and training of human cognitive abilities, under the premise that the brain is a muscle that needs to be exercised regularly.

To generate usage, we had a resident, Dolly Moser, spearhead the program. We felt that compliance would be higher if seniors were encouraged by one of their own. We sat back and waited, not really sure what to expect.

The results of the experiment became evident very quickly. Under Dolly's leadership and quiet encouragement, we soon had more than 30 residents using the MindFit Brain Fitness Program. Although many had little previous experience with computers, and there were some sweaty palms at first, the residents quickly adapted to playing games that are intended to improve such abilities as visual search, time estimation, naming, categorization, visual and auditory short-term memory, location memory, spatial orientation, speed of reaction, and hand-eye coordination. They lined up at the cubicles in our soon-to-become popular computer room as though they were getting something for free — which, in fact, they were — and started to make more use of the computers in their own apartments.

The program did so well at Lester that we recently expanded it to residents at our Jewish Federation Plaza facility in West Orange and South Orange B'nai Brith Federation House. Residents at these two independent living communities have proven equally as enthusiastic.

As for Dolly, she did such a good job in jumpstarting the program that she was named last June as Resident of the Year by the New Jersey Association of Homes and Services for the Aging — with my staff and I tagging alongside of her to present a seminar on the program's success at the association's annual convention in Atlantic City.

In fact, Dolly herself became so conversant with computers and social networking that her granddaughter gave her the highest complement of all. "Grandma," the teenager wrote to Dolly on Facebook, "You are still relevant."

Families and caregivers needing answers to broader eldercare questions and help with community resources can contact Elderlink — a portal to all MetroWest services for older adults and their families. Elderlink can be reached at 973-765-9050, or via email at elderlink@jfsmetrowest.org.

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