Louth Age Friendly

ACORN Smart Tablet Pilot

Summary Report 2019

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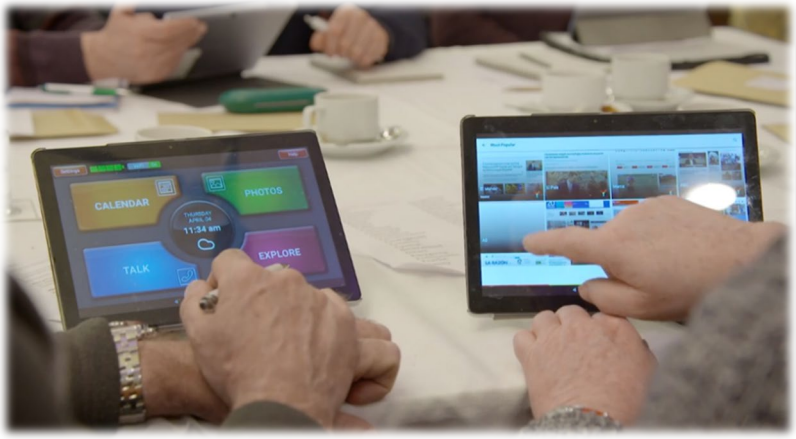
1 Introduction

In the last ten years, there has been a revolution in social networks and human interaction; smart devices have fundamentally changed how people interact. They have become the primary mechanism for many in maintaining and establishing real-world connections and they have become a source of news, entertainment and commercial engagement.

Loneliness and social isolation are harmful to our health[1]: research shows that lacking social connections is as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad, 2015) and, conversely, social networks and friendships not only have an impact on reducing the risk of mortality or developing certain diseases, but they also help individuals to recover when they do fall ill (Marmot, 2010). This is now a very real and prevalent issue within the ageing population. Diminishing health, reduced social networks, the possible loss of a spouse and reduced access to family members all contribute to reduced independence and isolation.



For those not digitally connected the risk of social exclusion is heightened. Digital adoption remains a significant challenge for many older adults and, consequently, this has limited the effectiveness of the public and commercial sectors that endeavour to serve them. Age- related accessibility and design limitations, digital literacy and attitudes to technology are key contributors to this reluctance to embrace technology. Studies[2] have also shown that the complexity of user interfaces coupled with a lack of prior knowledge of digital solutions create feelings of humiliation and embarrassment resulting in rejection of new digital technology.

[1] CORNWELL, E. Y., & WAITE, L. J. (2009). Social Disconnectedness, Perceived Isolation, and Health among Older Adults. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *50*(1), 31–48.

[2] Pew Research Center 2014 Older Adults and Technology Use Available at: http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/04/03/older-adults-and-technology-use/

Many computer skills training courses find themselves challenged by the multitude of smart devices and computer technologies available - iOS and Android, big button phones or Windows pc's/ laptops all of which can differ significantly from each other. Consequently, an inordinate amount of time is spent on the specifics of technology operating systems rather than the digital services and applications they offer. This results in a longer, less effective learning cycle for the participant and limited knowledge transfer for relevant applications or services.

By contrast, the ACORN pilot differed from other options because a) it focussed on a platform that introduced participants to many of the important services and applications which promote social inclusion first and b) it provided a training program that was centred around a more efficient digital skills training smart tablet platform. Using age friendly design, the platform was designed specifically to support those with limited digital skills and accessibility challenges, supporting improved knowledge of:

- Websites
- Essential Government Services
- Common helpful applications
- A simple browser tool
- Easy access calendar function
- Easy communication tools Video calls / Messaging and Email
- Sharing of photos
- Access to News services.

2 Trial Objectives

The ACORN pilot project sought to demonstrate the impact of effective smart technology solutions for improving the health and wellbeing of older adults in urban and rural communities, specifically in:

- Demonstrating how an age friendly tablet designed solution, with the appropriate supports, can significantly impact on the health and wellbeing of older adults living in urban and rural communities.
- Gaining valuable insights and evidence on 'what works' in supporting older adults 'go online' in order to access the full range of supports and local services.

2.1 Background and National Context

The Department of Health notes in its Key Trends 2016 report that average life expectancy has increased by 2 ½ years in a little over a decade and has been consistently higher than the EU average. A century ago it was about 50; today it is almost 77 for men and 82 for women. Furthermore, it is predicted that the number of people over the age of 65 in Ireland will reach 1.4 million by 2041,with those in the 80+ age bracket set to quadruple.

2.2 National Positive Ageing Strategy 2013 (NPAS)

National and Local Government policy strongly supports older people live independently and actively for as long as possible within their own communities. Local government, in partnership with key agencies, plays a central role in creating the conditions to enable this to be the case. There are various national policy documents relevant in the context of Age Friendly (a list of key policy documents is included in Appendix I). One of the principal documents underpinning both National and Local Government policy with regards to older people is the National Positive Ageing Strategy (NPAS) 2013. The NPAS was developed

Following extensive consultation with older people and their representatives about what was needed to enable them to age positively and provides the foundation for planning for an ageing population in Ireland into the future. The Strategy sets out a vision for Ireland as,

"…a society for all ages that celebrates and prepares properly for individual and population ageing. It will enable and support all ages and older people to enjoy physical and mental health and wellbeing to their full potential. It will promote and respect older people's engagement in economic, social, cultural, community and family life, and foster better solidarity between generations….."

3 ACORN Smart Tablet Solution Overview

The ACORN (www.myacorn.ie) is a smart tablet solution, purpose-built to solve the challenge of online adoption and to improve the quality of life for the user. It aims to solve the digital adoption challenge through intuitive age friendly design, providing content that is immediately relevant to the user in a closed secure network. ACORN sees itself as differentiating from generic tablets by servicing the users core needs through 3 interaction elements -**Inform, Interact** and **Involve.** By Informing, the solution endeavours to provide comprehensive help, guidance and support on digital services and keep users informed on news and upcoming events. By Interacting, ACORN's aim is to give users a secure, user friendly interface to communicate and schedule events with family, friends and the wider community and by Involving, the ACORN tries to encourages older people to get more involved and continue to contribute in their local community and areas of interest. Aligning with the World Health Organisation's research, the ACORN focuses on the following needs for older people: **security, communication, sustained independence (transport, support and interests), finance and health**.

4 Project Partners

The ACORN Project team was led by Age Friendly Louth in collaboration with Cliffrun Media Ltd, and 30 older participants from Louth county. Team members from Louth supported the project at local level, including the Age Friendly County Coordinator and the Older Person's Council Support Coordinator. In addition, a number of volunteer peer mentors supported the learning. Funding for the project was provided Louth County Council.

4.1 Participation

Trial participants were recruited by Age Friendly Louth, through the Community Development Departments, from groups who are actively engaged in local communities. The participants were drawn from a broad range of circumstances and experiences, possessing varying abilities and came from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

- Trial participation was entirely voluntary, and each participant received an ACORN Smart tablet device.
- Over the period of the trial, participants were invited to attend a number of group training sessions in their local areas.
- Participants were asked to try out the features of the device on a bi-weekly/monthly basis and to give opinions on these features. Their comments and feedback informed the look of the final product
- Louth Local Authority hosted an induction day to enable the participants and the product development team to meet each other. Participants were introduced to the device and an on-boarding process was undertaken with the assistance of the technical support team. Trial participants were also introduced to features of the device and invited to take part in smaller group training sessions at local level.

- Small group sessions not only provided participants with more intensive training but also afforded them with an opportunity to present the product team with feedback on the device and suggestions for amendments and improvements.

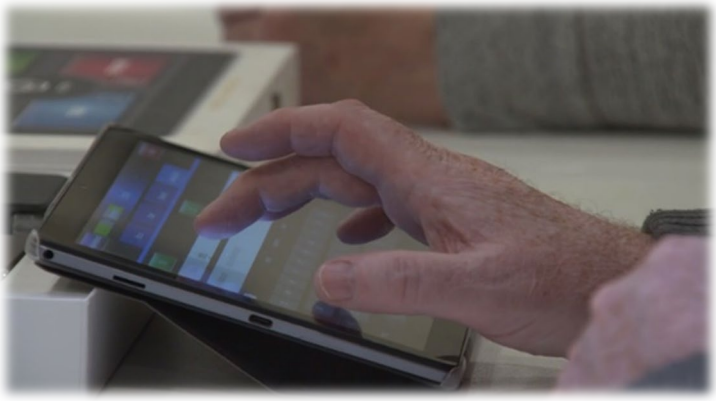
Over the period of the project participants influenced the following changes:

- User Interface Modifications.
    - The ACORN team made changes to many aspects of the user interface to improve the user experience based on feedback.

  e.g : Simplifying the Calendar, improving how to access contacts, improving internet browsing, full access to Play Store as well as curated apps. Introduction of a radio player and additional Email features
- Battery – longer life capacity
    - Improvements in the operating system provided better notification of charging time and the rate of charge.
- Longer leads for the charger
    - Users indicated a desire to have longer charging cables which would allow use while charging.

5 Observations and Outcomes

The ACORN Pilot Project was a live "pilot" trial of a new smart technology product. The participants understood their roles as user testers and took them very seriously - coming prepared to the sessions with suggestions such as ... pinching out the screen to make the text bigger; looking for specific apps, getting the hang of Group messages - which is interesting for people who have never used groups chat before. This feedback was incorporated by the designers in the development process. There was keen interested in communicating with family members outside of the trial environment via the the Companion app. Participants did not get over exorcised if things went wrong because they saw their role as testers important.



Live upgrades of the device also provided them with a greater level of awareness about the product that is not afforded to people who buy off the shelf; many of the participants found this exhilarating. On the other hand, changes made to the device sometimes brought a level of instability to the product and this could be frustrating if not dealt with immediately.

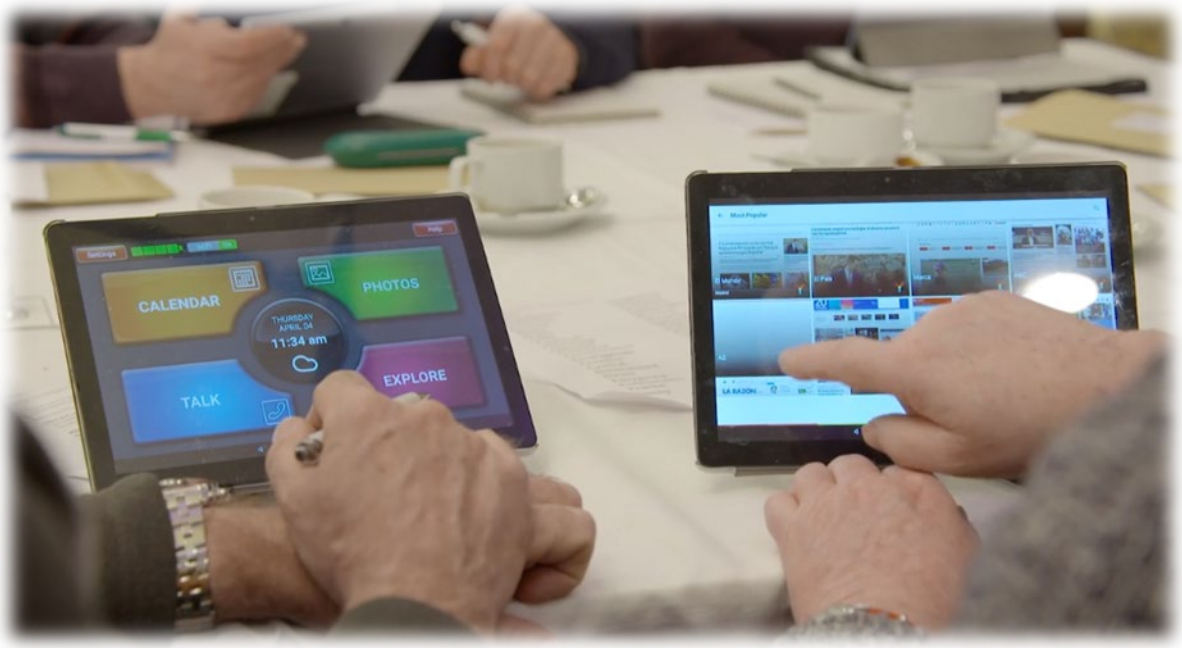
These issues were addressed during the small group training sessions. Trial participants were not only provided with tutorials on the features of the device but also received technical support to assist them with upgrades to the device. This created a more stimulating learning environment. The support team received phonecalls and messages from people in the evenings (and sometimes late at night) as they experimented with the features, which was a very encouraging sign of adoption.

Each small group session was pre-planned in advance by the Head of Training (from Cliffrun Media Ltd.) and the Age Friendly Louth Project Support Coordinator to pre-empt any technical or learning issues. The varying levels of technical skill sets among participants did cause some problems, but these were overcome by peer mentors who provided support to those in most need of extra help, either on the day or by arranging to meet up over coffee at local level.

Feedback from trial participants indicated that those who were less proficient would have liked weekly training sessions while those who had some level of proficiency were happy with the fortnightly classes. It was found that the monthly intervals left participants too long without

support, particularly if they were encountering any technical issues. As it transpired, the training schedule for Meath, which was fortnightly, proved to be the more successful.

The ACORN Smart Technology pilot project strongly suggests that designing technology specifically for those less familiar with modern digital solutions will generate beneficial results. It demonstrated increased confidence and social connectedness amongst the participants and it confirmed that, once users developed moderate skills in digital utilisation, they became eager to learn more and utilise the digital services available to them. The collaborative nature of the project is what made it a distinctive experience. Bringing service providers, older people and product designers together to develop a device that encourages and supports older people to go online is unusual, as it can be time consuming and fraught with problems. The ACORN Project trials proved to be a stimulating experience for all involved.



The involvement of older people in product development at design stage was insightful on the part of the device provider. It presented the older participants with an opportunity to influence the look and feel of the product and, more importantly, to have a say in the content. This made the process a more meaningful and relevant experience for them. It also provided the Product Development team with first-hand experience of how older people interact with smart technology and their perspectives on what otherwise might have been alien to them. The participants were also keen to learn how to use apps like You Tube and Spotify. They wanted to be able to listen to LMFM and Country and Western. They learned how to do car tax online.

6 Conclusions:

The project trials revealed a number of valuable observations:

6.1 Technology

- Technology Designed for older people (ACORN) (www.myAcorn.ie) can have a direct positive impact on digital adoption. Daily usage became the norm for 70% of participants. This is evidenced given there was a broad range of experience within the participant group with at least 7 participant who had never used smart technology prior to the trial.
- The trial showed significant increases in the utilisation of smart tablet features. Participants accessed more applications more frequently with minimal training and intervention. Age friendly websites were more frequently utilised by participants. Where text size could not be enlarged or applications were confusing, users tended to avoid.
- Participant Survey: Shows a wide distribution of application utilisation.

6.2 Training

- The social aspect of group learning for older people should not be under estimated. Most of the trial participants indicated that they did not want the classes to end.
- Mixing very proficient participants with those who have no computer skills can be both positive and negative. Peer mentoring proved to be a very successful means of helping those participants who found the training more challenging. All of the project trial participants found peer learning a very positive and enjoyable experience.
- Set routines were found to be very important, particularly for those older people who have early cognitive impairment or acquired brain injury issues. Training schedule timelines and the training programme content needs to be very structured and focused.

6.3 Social

- The enthusiasm and belief that they could use the ACORN became evident quickly, despite the relative newness of the concepts, and initial nervousness. The Louth participants wanted to have their contacts set up, they wanted everyone in the room in their group and if they lost contacts for any reason would always get in touch to let us know. They were keen to message and call and send calendar invites to occasions.
- A number of the participants had health issues and couldn't make some of the sessions as a result but they sent messages from hospital and were keen not to miss out. Other than this exception, small group sessions had full attendance.

6.4 Mobile Broadband

- Louth had approximately 1/3 of participants who had no broadband internet at home. Utilisation of a Mobile Data SIM allowed people - who had never been online in their own homes before - go online and they did.

6.5 Follow up Session

- In addition to the trial, 10 of the Louth participants, came to a day session on the Attend Anywhere app and used it for Group video conferencing. They were keen to use Acorn in lots of ways