SINGAPORE | DIGITAL INCLUSION

The Silver Generation in the Age of Digital Disruptions

Digital technologies have brought about great convenience for many, but less tech-savvy senior citizens may struggle to keep up. Singapore's Silver Infocomm Initiative brings together government agencies, non-governmental organisations and the community to provide a support network for senior citizens to ride the waves of digital disruptions confidently.

⊕ SINGAPORE

Tan Yi Xuan is a researcher at the Centre for Liveable Cities, working on Complex Systems Studies and Sustainable Integrated Districts.

Even with access to smartphones, some senior citizens find it daunting to navigate the various functions of these devices.
Image: Satjawat Boontanataweepol / Dreamstime.com

The Challenge

For most working adults, smartphone apps have made ordering meals, booking cabs, and completing government transactions, like paying utility bills, a breeze.

As mobile services proliferate, the national goal is to have 100% of Singapore's government services digitalised and 95% of citizen-to-government transactions done online by 2023.

Yet as Singapore surges ahead digitally, less tech-savvy populations such as senior citizens struggle to keep up. In 2006, before the launch of the Intelligent Nation 2015 (iN2015) Masterplan for Singapore's push towards a Smart Nation, less than half of those aged 50 and above were computer users. An even lower 32% of these seniors used the Internet. Being unacquainted with technology compromises their engagement with friends, their enrichment through online resources and the convenience of transacting digitally.

According to the Infocomm Media Development Authority's (IMDA) 2018 Annual Survey on Infocomm Usage in Households and by Individuals, the inertia to embrace a digital lifestyle boils down to two factors. First, these seniors lacked the digital literacy. Second, they were daunted by the steep learning curve and feared making mistakes. To become a digitally-ready and inclusive nation, Singapore needed to boost efforts to guide these senior citizens out of their comfort zones and provide them with supportive environments to learn to use digital technologies confidently.

Silver Infocomm Wellness Ambassadors (SIWAs) volunteer at digital readiness workshops to offer practical guidance on smartphone usage and boost the confidence of less tech-savvy counterparts to embrace a digital lifestyle.
Image: Infocomm Media Development Authority

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The Silver Infocomm Initiative promotes IT awareness and digital literacy among seniors above 50, so that they can be actively engaged in the digital age.

The Solution

To bridge the digital divide, the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA)—now IMDA—unveiled the Silver Infocomm Initiative (SII) in 2007, which has recently been folded into the new Seniors Go Digital Programme in June 2020. As a key digital inclusion strategy under the iN2015 Masterplan, the SII aims to promote IT awareness and digital literacy among seniors above 50, so that they can be actively engaged in the digital age.

One way to kick-start the seniors' learning journey was by giving them dedicated spaces to access technological devices and learning resources. Over 50 physical learning hubs, called Silver Infocomm Junctions (SIJs), are set up around the island and operated by voluntary welfare organisations, community clubs and non-profit organisations. Senior citizens simply visit their nearest SIJ to receive affordable

infocomm training, which cover over 30 topics such as setting up passwords, reading online news and searching for information online. Being digitally ready also entails staying safe online. SIJ courses are continuously revised to provide cybersecurity guidance, such as spotting signs of phishing, to help seniors stay ahead of cyberspace threats.

For individuals who prefer learning at home or at their own pace, the IM Silver portal was unveiled in 2017 to complement the SIJs and bring classes online. The portal's online learning resources, including e-books, videos and seminars, gives the seniors more autonomy in their learning, and also makes learning accessible to those who are less able to physically visit the SIJs.

Digital readiness is also a national effort. Through the Intergen IT

There has to be the human touch and effort to reach out to people to give them confidence to use new technology.

Bootcamp organised by IMDA and the Council for Third Age, youths who possess a trove of digital knowledge, guide seniors to learn computer skills and use social networking tools like Skype and Facebook. These bootcamps offer mutual benefits that bridge the generation gap: seniors cross the digital divide while the younger community become more understanding towards less tech-savvy seniors.

With greater proficiency, some seniors can actively contribute to a digitally-ready nation and boost confidence in their peers. The Silver Infocomm Wellness Ambassador (SIWA) programme was initiated in 2011, and tech-savvy senior citizens who have inspired their peers to embrace a digital lifestyle could be nominated and jointly appointed by IMDA and People's Association Active Ageing Council (PA AAC) as ambassadors. They volunteer at IMDA events, serving as mentors to their peers. As SIWAs can better relate to their less tech-savvy counterparts's challenges, their intra-generational support makes the learning process less daunting and more motivating.

Senior citizens get to bond with the youth cyber-guides while being digitally connected and getting acquainted with computer usage.
Image: Infocomm Media Development Authority

Madam Yeo Beng Choon (in purple), a Silver Infocomm Wellness Ambassador (SIWA) since 2015, volunteers at the West Coast Community Centre to guide her peers on the use of Zoom video-conferencing.
Image: Singapore Press Holdings

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The Outcome

In its 13th year, the SII has helped more than 350,000 seniors embrace IT to connect better with the community, enhance their quality of life and seize opportunities in the digital age. In 2019, 95% and 58% of senior citizens aged 50–59 years and 60 years and above respectively used Internet-enabled devices daily. A growing pool of more than 230 SIWAs also continue to inspire their peers to embrace a digital lifestyle.

Mdm Yeo Beng Choon, a 73-year-old retiree is one such example. Despite having computer skills, she lacked the confidence to go from a 2G phone to an unfamiliar 3G smartphone. After receiving help from her son to make the change, Mdm Yeo decided to pay it forward by becoming a SIWA. She

now volunteers at IMDA's annual IT Roadshow and encourages peers to take smartphone and computer classes. The digital skills she has gained also allowed her to connect with her friends online and to continue teaching her peers through virtual platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, where social gatherings were restricted.

On her motivation to be a SIWA, she say, "senior citizens need the courage to step forward to learn. We are there to relate to their struggles, and guide them using familiar analogies."

As Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister-in-Charge of the Smart Nation Initiative, points out, "there has to be the human touch and effort to

reach out to people to give them confidence to use new technology".

Achieving digital inclusion requires a whole-of-society effort—a government mandate, non-governmental organisation resources, and community volunteer networks are all necessary for digital inclusivity initiatives to have reach, scale and sustainability. This collaborative relationship is crucial for enhancing SII to include the 4 in 10 seniors who are still lagging in a digital society. 🔍