

OLDER ADULTS' ENGAGEMENT

Technology projects | Barriers & Facilitators | Solutions & Tips

AGE-WELL

A federally-funded Network of Centre of Excellence (NCE), dedicated to creation of technology and services that to help older Canadians maintain their independence, health and quality of life. This pan-Canadian network encompasses researchers from 29 universities, government and over 110 industry and non-profit partners united by the vision of harnessing the potential of emerging and advanced technologies to promote healthy aging.

OA-INVOLVE

A core AGE-WELL project studying the practices and experiences of older adults' engagement in technology projects, aiming to develop guidelines for participatory research and development (R&D) of technologies. OA-INVOLVE documents how older adults are involved in AGE-WELL projects over time, focusing on the benefits, challenges and solutions to participatory work. OA-INVOLVE is actively involving older adults throughout the research process in advisory and decision-making roles through a collaborative, trans-national Older Adults' Research Partner Group. OA-INVOLVE Project is co-led by Drs. Susan Kirkland and Judith Sixsmith.

Participatory R&D with older adults

Participatory research and development approaches are characterized by active involvement of older adults - the intended users of the technology - in the entire process. They are based on principles of democracy and reciprocity; empowering the participants through co-ownership and decision-making. Participatory approaches



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Engaging older adults in AGE-WELL technology projects

It is recognized that involving older adults in the development of technologies intended for their use creates societal, economic and research benefits; however, currently there is limited guidance on the practical aspects of planning and working with older adults in developing technologies. Successful participatory approaches rely on developing strong professional relationships with community members, but may be resource-intensive and often require adaptations of research methods. Moreover, funding models do not always support early older adults' engagement in early phases of the R&D process. Implementation of participatory approaches requires a shift from traditional researcher-centred thinking towards a more dynamic, multi-directional, and egalitarian process.

Practical tips for engaging the older adults throughout the research process

Recruitment & Timeline

- ✦ Use a variety of methods for recruitment to ensure that a diverse group will represent varied preferences of older adults, recognizing that each older adult is unique and cannot represent all older adults.
- ✦ Keep the recruitment process open so that new older adult members can be brought into the project if there is attrition.
- ✦ Include in the timeline a period to phase out or transition older adult involvement in the research. Present other opportunities (e.g. joining a university panel of community participants in research) for older adults to stay engaged in research if they wish.
- ✦ Do not assume that a particular group (e.g. those with dementia) cannot, because of their personal situation, be involved in the projects - make needed accommodations.

Consent, Terms of Reference & Roles

- ✦ Obtain ongoing consent before each session or research stage. Watch for non-verbal cues indicating discomfort or intent to discontinue session. Address any concerns regarding privacy and sharing data openly.
- ✦ Agree on terms of reference (e.g. expectations, roles, purpose, etc.) at the beginning, and regularly revisit terms to ensure they are remembered, understood or changed if necessary.
- ✦ Plan for choice and flexibility of involvement. Include older adults in planning and decision-making where appropriate.
- ✦ Involve older adults actively in all aspects of the research process in accordance to their preferences (e.g. as co-designers), and not just as experimental subjects or interviewees if they wish.

Training & Information

- ✦ Provide training about participatory research to researchers and older adults during recruitment and on an ongoing basis.
- ✦ Provide enough information without being overwhelming. Use plain language.

For more information contact the project manager at: Izabela.Panek@dal.ca

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- ✦ Repeat key points. Provide information in form, medium and frequency preferred by the older person.
- ✦ Establish the best ways to share information (e.g. email, hard copy) and provide information in a variety of formats (e.g. detailed instructions, lay summaries, and glossaries for technical terms).
- ✦ Establish a comfortable & flexible level of engagement in the research and planning.
- ✦ Ensure written information is culturally appropriate and accessible to different levels of literacy and also visually engaging (consider potential vision limitations).

Facilitating participation

- ✦ Have face-to-face meetings early in the process to help break down barriers, foster rapport and “togetherness”.
- ✦ Build into the proposal the financial resources required to facilitate engagement (e.g. travel, group meeting space, hospitality, etc.). Consider (and discuss with older adult members) the provision of honoraria.
- ✦ Secure accessible, comfortable & safe space for meetings (close availability of washrooms, regular breaks, dietary restrictions and assistance). Meet in social places that are not just university meeting rooms; provide directions as needed.
- ✦ Agree on ways to contribute from home (e.g. by Skype, phone, personal visit).
- ✦ Negotiate and manage ground rules for group activities.
- ✦ Maintain regular contact. Establish a regular means of open communication throughout the research process.

Facilitating learning & conceptualization

- ✦ Provide relevant design elements such as stories, personas and scenarios to help with conceptualization (e.g. art, videos, written pieces, drama).
- ✦ Arrange experiences that support conceptualization (e.g. visit smart home exhibition of rehabilitation research facility).
- ✦ Provide workshop type activities. Provide repeated opportunities for hands-on interaction and reflection with technology.
- ✦ Provide scenarios that are relevant to those involved. Draw on their own experiences to help link the project's points with their own lives (e.g. provide scenarios of everyday life when technology might be used, avoid abstract concepts).
- ✦ Use lay language when introducing and discussing technology.

Valuing older adults' engagement & Feedback

- ✦ Illustrate how the engagement in research can positively impact their lives, the lives of others, and the healthcare system or the technology product.
- ✦ Provide feedback on outcomes of their engagement and how it contributed to the research, processes, and planning.
- ✦ Ensure that everybody's voices are heard and valued.
- ✦ Reach out to and regularly communicate gratitude for the transformative impact of their contributions. Acknowledge the participants' collective effort and contributions.
- ✦ Consider providing remuneration for time and contribution.
- ✦ Regularly seek feedback from the engaged older adults including subjective evaluation of their experiences with their ongoing participation.

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