

## Older Adults and Distance Learning

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In Western nations, demographic shifts are resulting in a major reassessment of our countries' policies and practices toward older adults. Oftentimes, older adults are leading the discussion by questioning government policies toward work after "retirement," critiquing employer policies toward hiring older adults, resisting traditional "busywork" volunteer assignments, and insisting on new and different educational opportunities. As older adults become integrated with the rest of society, distance learning use among older adults will steadily increase. In this tabletop session, I will address (1) the myths about older adults' use of technology, (2) the types of distance learning programs for older adults, and (3) barriers to older adults' full participation in distance learning. My goal is to engage in dialogue about the possibilities of taking deliberative, collaborative action to include older adults in educational and work opportunities.

One of the most damaging stereotypes of older adults is that they are rigid and do not want to learn. We often attribute rigidity to age rather than personality. As Nichols (2001) points out, rigidity "is less a factor of age than of personal history, pressure, and predisposition" (p. 238). Empirical studies have falsified the widespread idea that older adults are more resistant to technology (e.g., Morris & Venkatesh, 2000).

Older adults participate in education opportunities in varying phases of older adulthood for multiple purposes. I have grouped distance learning programs for older adults into three broad categories: programs for personal growth and empowerment, workforce development, and workplace learning. Within all three of these categories, there are programs geared toward older adults specifically and programs that target the general population.

The future is bright for adults entering older age with many opportunities for collaboratively reshaping their place in our society. Older adults will undoubtedly be participants in distance learning programs. The question is whether their potential will be maximized. Through consideration, collaboration, and future research, distance learning can play an important role in this societal transformation.

Morris, M. G., & Venkatesh, V. (2000). Age differences in technology adoption decisions: Implications for a changing work force. *Personnel Psychology*, 53(2), 375-403.

Nichols, K. (2001). Optimizing the silver collar worker: In the shoes of the older employee. *International Journal of Organization Theory and Behavior*, 4(3&4), 225.

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